

# The Suspect Genome

Peter F. Hamilton

Book 4 of greg mandel



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# THE SUSPECT GENOME

# Peter F. Hamilton

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## Chapters

One - The Dodgy Deal  
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Three - Degrees of Guilt

*Here's an absorbing and intricately plotted mystery set in a troubled future England, a story that expertly and effortlessly mixes two genres to produce a hybrid worthy of the best of either: a science fiction mystery full of surprises, where nothing is as it seems to be.*

*Prolific new British writer Peter F. Hamilton has sold to Interzone, In Dreams, New Worlds, Fears, and elsewhere. He sold his first novel, Mindstar Rising, in 1993, and quickly followed it up with two sequels, A Quantum Murder and The Nano Flower, all detailing further adventures of Greg Mendel, who also features in "The Suspect Genome." Hamilton's first three books didn't attract a great deal of attention, on this side of the Atlantic, at least, but that changed dramatically with the publication of his next novel, The Reality Dysfunction, a huge modern Space Opera (it needed to be divided into two volumes for publication in the United States) that is itself only the start of a projected trilogy of staggering size and scope, the Night's Dawn trilogy. The Reality Dysfunction has been attracting the reviews and the acclaim that his prior novels did not, and has suddenly put Hamilton on the map, perhaps a potential rival for writers such as Dan Simmons, Iain Banks, Paul J. McAuley, Greg Benford, C. J. Cherryh, Stephen R. Donaldson, Colin Greenland, and other major players in the expanding subgenre of Modern Baroque Space Opera, an increasingly popular area these days. The subsequent novel in the trilogy, The Neutronium Alchemist, generated the same kind of excited critical*

*buzz. Hamilton's most recent books include his first collection, A Second Chance at Eden, the third novel in the Night's Dawn trilogy, The Naked God, and a novella chapbook, Watching Trees Grow.*

# One — The Dodgy Deal

It was only quarter past nine on that particular Monday morning, but the September sun was already hot enough to soften the tarmac of Oakham's roads. The broad deep-tread tires of Richard Townsend's Mercedes were unaffected by the mildly adhesive quality of the surface, producing a sly purring sound as they crossed the spongy black surface.

Radio Rutland played as he drove. The station was still excited by the news about Byrne Tyler—the celebrity's death was the biggest thing to happen in the area all month. A newscaster was interviewing some detective about the lack of an arrest. The body had been found on Friday, and the police still had nothing.

Richard turned onto the High Street, and the road surface improved noticeably. The heart of the town was thriving again. Local shops were competing with the national brand-name stores that were muscling in on the central real estate, multiplying in the wake of the economic good times that had come to the town. Richard always regretted not having any interests in the new consumerism rush, but he'd been just too late to leap on that gravy train. Real money had been very short in the immediate aftermath of the PSP years, which was when the retail sector began its revival.

He drove into the Pillings Industrial Precinct, an area of small factories and warehouses at the outskirts of the town. Trim allotments down the right hand side of the road were planted with thick banana trees, their clumps of green fruit waving gently in the muggy breeze. The sturdy trunks came to a halt beside a sagging weed-webbed fence that sketched out a jumble of derelict land. All that remained of the factory that once stood there was a litter of shattered bricks and broken concrete footings half glimpsed among the tangle of nettles and rampant vines. A new sign had been pounded into the iron-hard ocher clay, proclaiming it to be Zone 7, and Ready For Renewal, a Rutland Council/Townsend Properties partnership.

Zone 7 was an embarrassment. It was the first site anyone saw when they entered the Pillings Precinct: a ramshackle remnant of the bad old days. The irony being Pillings was actually becoming quite a success story. Most of the original units, twentieth-century factories and builders' merchants, had been refurbished to house viable new businesses, while the contemporary zones, expanding out into the verdant cacao plantations that encircled the town, were sprouting the uniform blank sugar-cube structures of twenty-first-century construction. Seamless weather-resistant composite walls studded with mushroom-like air-conditioning vents, and jet-black solar-cell roofs.

Whatever industry was conducted inside, it was securely masked by the standardized multipurpose facades. Even Richard wasn't sure what some of the companies did.

He parked the Merc outside his own offices, a small brick building recently renovated. Colm, his assistant, was already inside, going through the datapackages that had accumulated overnight on his desktop terminal.

"The architect for Zone 31 wants you to visit," he said as Richard walked in. "There's some problem with the floor reinforcements. And a Mr. Alan O'Hagen would like to see you. He suggested 10:30 this morning."

Richard paused. "Do I know him?"

Colm consulted his terminal. "We don't have any file on record. He said he may be interested in a zone."

"Ah." Richard smiled. "Fine, 10:30."

It was a typical morning spent juggling data. Builders, suppliers, clients, accountants, local planning officials; they all expected him to clear up the mess they were making of their own jobs. He'd spent a lot of his own money over the last four years, schmoozing and paying off the county and town councillors to get his partnership with the precinct project, and it had paid off. Townsend Properties was currently involved in developing eight of the zones, with architects working on plans for another three. Having the massive Event Horizon corporation open a memox processing facility on Zone 12 a year ago had been a real triumph for the town; other smaller corporations had immediately begun to nose around, eager for subcontracts. Quite how the council development officers managed to pull off that coup always baffled Richard. He'd never known a supposedly professional team quite as incompetent as the people who worked at Rutland Council. Every job he undertook was besieged by official delays and endless obstructionist revisions.

The man who walked in at 10:30 prompt wasn't quite what Richard had expected. He was in his late fifties, nothing like any of those eager young business types who normally came sniffing around the precinct. Alan O'Hagen wore a gray business suit with a pale purple tie. He had a sense of authority which made Richard automatically straighten up in his chair and reach to adjust his own tie. Even the man's handshake was carefully controlled, an impression of strength held in reserve.

"What can I do for you?" Richard asked as his visitor settled into the leather chair before the desk.

"My company." Alan O'Hagen held up a silver palmtop cybofax. Its key blinked with a tiny pink light as it squirted a data package into the desktop terminal. Richard scanned the information quickly.

“Firedrake Marketing? I'm afraid I've never heard of it.”

O'Hagen smiled. “No reason you should. It's a small virtual company I own. I trade on-circuit, specializing in albums and multimedia drama games. I have some German software houses signed up, and a couple of African jazz bands who aren't well distributed in Europe. Naturally, I'd like to rectify that.”

“Uh huh.” Richard made an immediate guess about what kind of German software—the end of the PSP hadn't seen a total reversal of censorship in England. “So how does the Pillings Precinct fit in with all this?”

“I want Firedrake to become more than a virtual company. At the moment it consists of a circuit site with a few trial samples you can access, and an order form. I subcontract distribution and delivery to a mail-order company in Peterborough. After their fees, I'm not left with much in the way of profit. What I want to do is build up a distribution arm myself.”

“I see.” Richard made sure he wasn't grinning. It would appear predatory at this point. “And you'd like to build that distribution company here.”

“It's a possibility.”

“A very advantageous one for you. Event Horizon's memox plant would be next door, so there'd be no shortage of crystals, and we do have an excellent rail service to both Peterborough and Leicester. Not to mention a generous start-up tax allowance.”

“Every industrial precinct does, these days,” O'Hagen said. “Corby is offering a flat-rate construction loan for anyone starting on either of their new precincts.”

Richard blanked his irritation at the mention of Corby. He'd lost three clients to their precinct developers in the last six weeks. “You'll find us a competitive match for any other precinct, I assure you.”

“What about construction times?”

“That depends on the size of the operation you're looking for, of course.”

“Nothing extravagant to start with, but I will require a zone with considerable potential for expansion if things take off.”

“As I'm sure they will.” Richard walked over to the precinct map pinned on the wall. “I have several zones I can offer you.”

It took another two hours of cajoling before O'Hagen left. Richard had squirted just about every brochure and data package he'd got into the businessman's cybofax. He'd hate to play the man at poker; no hint of how keen he was had leaked from that impassive face. But the good news was that O'Hagen had invited Richard for dinner that night, suggesting the Lord Nelson restaurant in the Market Square.

After lunch, Richard drove to the courthouse in the town's old castle hall. Jodie Dobson, his solicitor, was waiting for him in the car park. In her mid-thirties, a junior partner in one of the local firms, she was more than capable when it came to corporate legal matters.

"We've got plenty of time," she said, gesturing to the ancient doors. "The land-registry clerk's only just finished his lunch."

"Fine." He paused. "I don't suppose you've heard of a company called Firedrake?"

"Should I have?"

"Not really." He waved his cybofax. "I was checking their site this lunchtime. They sell a response formulator for interactives. Once you've plugged into a drama, it'll take your character wherever you want to go inside the arena. The plotlines will reconfigure to incorporate your movements and speech into the story. They're claiming a much better reaction time than other software."

"Sounds fairly standard to me."

"Yes, but it's not just for flatscreens, it can handle a total VR immersion. It's fully compatible with all the major multimedia formats; you can supplement it to whatever drama you buy."

"Why the interest?"

He shrugged and gestured her through the doorway. "I think it could be quite successful."

The old stone hall had a vaulted ceiling, and whitewashed plaster walls hung with hundreds of horseshoes. Prior to the Warming the hall had been little more than a historical tourist attraction, used only occasionally for a magistrate's court. Then in the aftermath of the seas flooding the Lincolnshire fens, the vast influx of refugees had more than doubled Rutland's population. The hall's legal activities had expanded to become full-time. Modern partitioning had been used to break up the rear of the hall into small office cubicles. Jodie and Richard maneuvered along a narrow corridor between the transparent sound-proofed walls. The Land Registry & Claims cubicle was barely large enough to hold the two of them as well as the clerk.

Jodie had the petition already prepared, and handed over the two memox crystals detailing the case, including the original farmer's title to the land. Richard, as the claimee, had to sign a host of papers verifying the action.

"Any idea when the case will be heard?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Townsend." The clerk's hand fluttered over the pile of memox crystals and paper folders on his desk. "We have over eight hundred ownership cases filed in this court alone. The local PSP Land Rights allocation committee confiscated a lot of property."

"Yes, I appreciate that, but this is land for a commercial venture which will benefit many people in the town. It'll create jobs, and bring



wealth into the area. Surely that warrants some additional attention.”

“I would say yes,” the clerk murmured diplomatically. “But it's not up to me.”

“Nevertheless...I'd be grateful if you could point this out to the powers that be.”

“I'll do what I can.”

When they were back outside in the scorching sunlight Jodie frowned. “That was sailing close to the wind. You don't do backroom deals in a civic office.”

“I'll bear it in mind. And you should remember that we need that leisure complex; your partnership will scoop up a big fee for steering it through the legal stages.”

“I am aware of basic marketplace economics, thank you.”

“Good. There's a lot of new industry moving into town right now. That means wealthy educated people looking for somewhere to relax, and prepared to pay for the privilege. Rutland Water is a fabulous commercial resource, which is tragically underused. Can you believe there's only three hotels on the shore?”

Jodie nudged him softly. He looked around to see a bicycle entering the castle hall grounds. It was Andy Broady peddling heavily, his ruddy young face glistening with sweat. Richard almost laughed out loud. Even in this weather the kibbutzniks still wore their thick dark dungarees.

Andy dismounted and leaned the bike against a wall. It was an ancient contraption of black steel tubes, with a wicker basket on the front of broad handlebars. The County Museum would be proud to possess a specimen like it.

Richard gave him a pleasant nod. Andy glared back furiously. For a moment Richard thought he might stalk over and swing a punch. Eventually, he pulled a bundle of papers out of the basket and made for the hall doors.

“My relocation offer stands,” Richard said. “There's no need for either of us to go through this. It is my land.”

“My father died this morning,” Andy said. His voice was close to choking.

“I'm very sorry to hear that,” Richard said.

“Accident, my arse!”

Richard kept his voice neutral. “I don't understand.”

“Listen, you.” Andy took a pace toward them, his finger raised. “Twenty years he worked that land. He kept the faith and taught it to all of us. God rewarded our labors with enough fruit and crops to feed ourselves. It's our home! We won't give it up.”

“With all respect to your father, God didn't give you that land.

The PSP did. They stole it from a family who were farming it a lot longer than twenty years, and didn't pay a penny in compensation. What kind of justice is that?"

"It's ours!" Andy was close to tears. "I've spent my life there."

Richard nearly said, *Time to move on, then*, but kept his sarcasm in check. It wouldn't do to get involved in a public fracas with some half-wit farm boy. Besides, the oaf was built like a combine harvester—solid power in a huge squat body. They stared at each other for a moment, then Andy hurried inside, rubbing the crucifix stitched to the front of his dungarees.

"Filing their counter claim, no doubt," Jodie said. "They'll appeal for post-acquisition compensation, you know. It's what I'd do in their situation."

"Fat lot of good that'll do them. I have full title."

"You'll have to let me see the plans for this leisure complex sometime. It must be quite something."

"It's a work of art. Most aesthetic."

"You mean, profitable."

He laughed. "What else?"

Alan O'Hagen had booked a table at the back of the Lord Nelson, where they were afforded some privacy. Richard enjoyed the small restaurant; it had tasteful antique decor, efficient service, and an excellent seafood menu. His ex-wife had always badgered him to take her, but he never had the money in those days. Now she was no longer a burden to him with her absurd middle-class a-fair-day's-work-for-a-fair-day's-pay ethic. Nothing worthwhile in this world came fair. The young waitress gave him a respectful smile as he came in. Success was the most succulent dish.

O'Hagen was waiting for him. Richard ordered a bottle of Australian Chardonnay from the wine list, almost the most expensive available. It was unusual for a client to buy him a meal, especially at this stage, and it made him wonder what kind of proposal O'Hagen was going to make.

"I want to take Zone 35," O'Hagen said. "However, I may have one small problem which I was wondering if you could help me with."

"Go on," Richard said. This was the part he enjoyed the most—the part, different every time, which had to be settled to make it all fall into place.

"The industrial unit will cost about half a million New Sterling to build and equip," O'Hagen said. "Firedrake is a viable concern, but I'm not going to get the capital backing from a bank to build a whole warehouse and mailing outfit from scratch. Not with that to offer as collateral on the deal."

"Firedrake can't be your only concern, surely?"

"It's not. But the kind of imports I've been dealing with in the past don't lend themselves to close examination. Besides, there's none of that money left."

"I see."

O'Hagen leaned over the table. "Look, the thing is this. At the moment Firedrake has a turnover of about 70,000 New Sterling per year. And that's just with one poxy site and not much advertising. Once my distribution arm is up and running I can expand the product range and the advertising. That'll start to generate enough income to pay off the kind of loan I'll need to get it started. I'm *this* close."

"I can see that, but..."

"Every business faces this point in the early years. It's a credibility gap, nothing more. I need the banks to take a favorable look at the proposal, that's all. England's economy is in a high boom stage right now, and it's going to last for a decade at least with this new giga-conductor Event Horizon has delivered. There's so much potential for expansion here, you know that. The banks are desperate for an excuse to invest in our companies."

"But have you got any kind of collateral you can offer the bank? Something concrete? Like you say, they're fairly flexible."

"I have one proposition. It's for you." He leaned in closer. "Become my partner in Firedrake. I'll sell you half of the shares."

"What?"

"It's simple. With your involvement, the bank is bound to approve the loan application. You're an established businessman; your development company is a success. With that kind of finance behind Firedrake, it couldn't fail."

"I'm sorry. It's my job to sell you part of the precinct, not the other way round. I'm not a buyer, Mr. O'Hagen."

"I'm not asking you to buy. I'm even prepared to pay you."

Richard carefully poured himself some more Chardonnay. "I don't follow."

"Look, what we're talking about here is credibility, right? I want financial credibility, and that's what I'll pay you for. You take a half share in Firedrake. It's not worth anything, there are only two shares, and they're valued at a pound each. I told you, it's a virtual company. Memory space on a mainframe, that's all. But if you combine its turnover with your company's involvement, we've got a valid application for an expansion loan. And you get another commercial unit built on the precinct, out of which you make a tidy profit. Nor will you be liable for Firedrake if—God forbid—it goes down the tube. The distribution operation will be a subsidiary which I own. There's no risk in it for you."

Richard hesitated. The idea almost made sense, and some of the arrangements he'd made on other deals were a lot less orthodox. "If I take a share in Firedrake, the banks will see what you're doing. That would help your credibility, and it would ruin mine."

"Yes. But if you'd taken that half share two years ago they'd be impressed. It would show that you'd been a part of a promising business for a decent period, and were now confident enough in it to expand."

"Hmm." Richard sat back and looked into that impassive face. O'Hagen was earnest, but certainly not pleading. "You mentioned payment. What kind of incentive would I have received to loan you my good name for the past two years?"

"I have a painting. It's a McCarthy, worth quite a bit. Not enough to trade in as collateral for a warehouse unit, you understand. But I could loan you that until Firedrake was earning enough to pay you back."

"How much is a bit?"

"Find the right collector, you should be able to get 20,000 for it."

Richard weighed it up. Twenty thousand for using his name and reputation to lever a loan from a bank for a deal in which he would profit. And costing one tiny blemish in record-keeping, a one-pound share and two years. To massage that kind of data you didn't even need to be an accountant...let alone a creative one. "I'd want to see Firedrake's accounts before I go any further," he said cautiously.

For the first time, there was a display of emotion on Alan O'Hagen's face as his lips moved into a small smile. "Come to my office tomorrow. My accountant will go over them with you."

Thistlemore Wood was a district on Peterborough's western sprawl, part of the industrial expansion which had turned the city into a commercial powerhouse in the post-War years. To south was an old park, now hosting an estate of hemispherical apartment blocks, silvery crescents rising up out of the grassland. The road Richard eased the Merc along was lined by closely planted maeosopis trees, their long branches curving into an arboreal arch above him. He had to slow on the edge of Thistlemore because a converter crew was at work on the road. Smoke was venting out of their big remoulder vehicle as it chewed up the cinder flecks the track was made from. An endless sheet of smooth thermo-hardened cellulose was extruded from its rear, a dark protective coating which sealed the raw earth away from pounding tires and searing sunlight. The crew diverted Richard around the vehicle, keeping him off the freshly laid surface. A couple of rickshaws came the other way, their riders clamping cloths over their noses as the smoke gushed around them.

The block where O'Hagen rented office space for Firedrake was eight stories high, its exterior white marble and copper glass. Satellite uplink antennae squatted on the roof inside their weather domes; an indicator of just how much data traffic the building handled. Richard pulled up in the visitors' car park, then took the lift to the sixth floor.

Firedrake had one employee. Apparently she did everything in the office: personal assistant, receptionist, site maintenance, made tea and coffee, handled communications. Like O'Hagen, she wasn't what Richard was expecting, but for very different reasons. She was small, though he quickly redefined that as compact. He didn't think she'd take very kindly to people who called her small. Every look was menacing, as if she were eyeing him up for a fight...a physical one. Her dress had short sleeves, showing arms scuffed with what looked like knife scars, and a tattoo: closed fist gripping a thorn cross, blood dripping.

After he'd given his name she reluctantly pressed her intercom button. "Mr. Townsend to see you," she growled.

"Thank you, Suzi," O'Hagen answered. "Send him in, please."

Her thumb jabbed at a door. "In there."

Richard went past her and found himself in Alan O'Hagen's office. "That's some secretary you've got there."

"She's cheap," O'Hagen replied with a grin. "She's also surprisingly efficient. And I don't get too many unwanted visitors barging in."

"I can imagine," Richard muttered.

O'Hagen indicated a woman who was standing at the side of his desk. "My accountant, Mrs. Jane Adams."

She gave Richard a curt nod. Her appearance was comfortable after the girl outside; she was in her late forties, dressed in a business suit, with white hair tidied in a neat short style.

"I understand you intend to invest in Firedrake," she said.

"That's what I'm here to decide."

"Very well." She gave O'Hagen a disapproving look. "I'm not sure I should be endorsing this kind of action."

"Jane, neither of us is getting any younger. If Firedrake works out the way we expect we'll have a decent nest-egg to sell to some kombinate or media prince. Hell, even Richard here might buy me out."

"Let's take it one step at a time, shall we," Richard said. "If I could see the accounts."

With one last reluctant look at O'Hagen, Mrs. Adams handed Richard a pair of memox crystals. "They're completely up to date," she said.

He put the first crystal into the slot on his cybofax and began

scrolling down the columns of figures. O'Hagen had been optimistic rather than honest when he said the company's turnover was 70,000. This year was barely over sixty, and the year before scraped in at fifty. But it was an upward trend.

"I've already identified several new software products I'd like Firedrake to promote," O'Hagen was saying. "I should be able to sign exclusivity rights for the English market on the back of this expansion project."

"May I see the painting, please?" Richard asked.

"Sure." O'Hagen picked up a slim kelpboard-wrapped package from behind his desk. Richard had been expecting something larger. This was barely forty centimeters high, thirty wide. He slipped the thin kelpboard from the front. "What is it?" he asked. The painting was mostly sky sliced by a line of white cloud, with the mound of a hill rising out of the lower right corner. Hanging in the air like some bizarre obsidian dagger was an alien spaceship, or possibly an airborne neolithic monument.

"*View of a Hill and Clouds*," O'Hagen said contentedly. "Remarkable, isn't it? It's from McCarthy's earlier phase, before he moved from oils to refractive sculpting."

"I see." Richard pulled the kelpboard wrapping back on. "I'd like to get it valued."

"Of course." O'Hagen smiled.

Richard took the painting to the Sotheby's office in Stamford on his way back from Thistlemore Wood. The assistant was appreciative when Richard told her he wanted it valued for his house-insurance policy. She took her time, checking its authenticity before giving him an estimate. Eighteen thousand New Sterling. Once again Mr. Alan O'Hagen was being financially optimistic. But all things considered, it wasn't a bad price for endorsing the Zone 35 development.

"I think we have an agreement," he told O'Hagen over the phone the next day.

There was a chuckle from the earpiece. "I thought you'd be able to appreciate a good deal. I'll get the paperwork over to you right away."

"Very well. I'll notify the precinct's banking consortium that I have another client."

Suzi turned up mid-afternoon carrying a small leather satchel. She opened it to produce a thin folder. There were two partnership agreement contracts to sign, both dated two years previously; even his signature counter-witness was filled in and dated. Mrs. Adams, he noted.

"It says here my partner in Firedrake is Newton Holdings,"

Richard said.

“Yeah. So?”

“I thought it was held by Mr. O'Hagen.”

“Newton belongs to him; it does his imports. You want to call him?”

He couldn't meet her impatient antagonistic stare. “No.” He signed the partnership contracts.

“Mr. O'Hagen said to say you can owe him the pound for the share,” Suzi said. She gathered up one copy of the contract and handed him a share certificate with his name on it: again dated two years ago.

“Tell him that's very generous of him.”

She scowled and marched out of the office. Richard glanced over the certificate again, then locked it and the partnership agreement in the wall safe.

Richard was having breakfast the next morning when the police arrived, hammering so hard on the door he thought they were trying to smash it down. He opened the door wearing just his dressing gown, blinking...partly from confusion at the team of eight armed uniformed officers standing on his front lawn, and partly at the bright morning sunlight.

The person knocking aggressively on his paintwork identified herself as Detective Amanda Patterson, holding her police card out for him to verify.

He didn't bother to show it to his cybofax. “I don't doubt who you are,” he murmured. Three cars were parked on the street outside, their blue lights flashing insistently. Neighbors were pressed up against windows watching the drama. A Globecast camera crew lurked at the end of the drive, pointing their fat black lenses at him.

“Richard Townsend?” the detective demanded.

He put on a smile as polite as circumstances would allow. “Guilty of that, at least.”

“Would you please accompany me to the station, sir. I have some questions for you.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I will arrest you.”

“For what, exactly?”

“Your suspected involvement in the murder of Byrne Tyler.”

Richard stared at her in astonishment, then managed to gather some dignity. “I hate to ask you this in such a public arena.” He indicated the camera crew. “But are you quite sure you have the right house?”

“Oh yes, sir. I have the right house. It's yours.”

“Very well. May I at least get dressed first?”

“Yes, sir. One of my male colleagues will accompany you.”

He gave a grunt of surprise as he realized just how serious she was. “I think I’d like my one phone call now as well.”

“That’s America’s Miranda rights, sir. But you’re certainly free to call a solicitor if you think you require one.”

“I don’t require one to establish my innocence,” Richard snapped. “I simply wish to sue you into your grave. You have no idea how much trouble this mistake will bring down on your head.”

Richard suspected the layout of the interview room at Oakham police station was deliberately designed to depress its occupants. Straight psychological assault on the subconscious. Drab light-brown walls shimmered harshly under the glare from the two biolum panels in the ceiling. The gray-steel desk in front of him vibrated softly, a cranky harmonic instigated by the buzzing air-conditioning grille.

He’d been in there for twenty minutes alone, dourly contemplating this ludicrous situation, before the door opened and Jodie Dobson came in.

“About time,” he barked at her. “Can I go now?”

She gave him a sober look. “No, Richard. This isn’t some case of mistaken identity. I’ve been talking to Detective Patterson, and they really do think you had something to do with Byrne Tyler’s murder.”

“That’s insane! I’ve never even met him.”

“I know, and I’m sure we can clear it up with a simple interview.”

“I want that Patterson cow sued for doing this to me. They tipped off the news team. I’ll have my face plastered all over the media. Do you know what kind of damage that’ll do to me? Business is about trust, credibility. I can’t believe this! She’s ruined five years’ hard work in five minutes. It was deliberate and malicious.”

“It’s not that bad. Listen, the quicker you’re out and cleared, the quicker we can instigate damage limitation.”

“I want her to make a public apology, starting with that news crew that was outside my bloody house.”

“We can probably get that. But you’ll need to cooperate. Fully.”

“Fine, bring them on!” He caught the tone in her voice. “What do you mean?”

“They’ve brought in some kind of specialist they want to sit in on your interview. Greg Mandel, he’s a gland psychic.”

Richard hoped his flinch wasn’t too visible. There were stories about gland psychics. Nothing a rational adult need concern themselves about, of course. Human psi ability was a strictly scientific field these days, quantified and researched. A bioware endocrine gland implanted in the brain released specific neurohormones to



stimulate the ability. But...“Why do they want him to interview me?”

“Help interview you,” Jodie stressed. “Apparently his speciality is sensing emotional states. In other words he'll know if you're lying.”

“So if I just say that I didn't kill this Byrne Tyler, Mandel will know I'm being truthful?”

“That's the way it works.”

“Okay. But I still want Patterson nailed afterward.”

Richard gave Mandel a close look when he entered the interview room. Approaching middle age, but obviously in shape. The man's movements were very...precise moving the chair just so to sit on rather than casually pulling it out from the desk as most people would. Richard supposed it was like a measure of confidence and Mandel seemed very self-assured. It was an attitude very similar to Alan O'Hagen's.

Amanda Patterson seated herself beside Mandel, and slotted a couple of matte-black memox crystals into the twin AV recording deck.

“Interview with Richard Townsend,” Patterson said briskly. “Conducted by myself, Detective Patterson, with the assistance of CID advisory specialist Greg Mandel. Mr. Townsend has elected to have his solicitor present.”

“I did not kill Byrne Tyler,” Richard said. He stared at Mandel. “Is that true?”

“In as far as it goes,” Mandel said.

“Thank you!” he sat back and fixed Patterson with a belligerent expression.

“However, I think we need to examine the subject in a little more detail before giving you a completely clean slate,” Mandel said.

“If you must.”

Mandel gave Patterson a small nod. She opened her cybofax and studied the display screen. “Are you are a partner in the Firedrake company, Mr. Townsend?” she asked.

“What?”

“A company called Firedrake, do you own half of the shares?”

“Well, yes. One share, fifty percent. But that's nothing to do with Byrne Tyler. It's a venture with a...a business colleague.”

“Who is that?” Mandel asked.

“Not that it's anything to do with you or this murder enquiry, but his name is Alan O'Hagen.”

“Interesting,” Detective Patterson said. “The other listed shareholder in Firedrake is Newton Holdings.”

“Well, yes, that's O'Hagen's company.”

“No, Mr. Townsend. According to the companies register, Newton

Holdings is owned by Byrne Tyler.”

Richard gave Jodie a desperate look. She frowned.

Detective Patterson consulted her cybofax again. “You’ve been partners for two years, is that right?”

“I...I’ve been a partner with Mr. O’Hagen for two years, yes.” He couldn’t help the way his eyes glanced at Mandel. The psychic was watching him impassively. “Not Byrne Tyler. I’ve never met him. Never.”

“Really?” Patterson’s tone was highly skeptical. “Have you ever visited the Sotheby’s office in Stamford?”

Richard hooked a finger around his shirt collar; the air-conditioning wasn’t making any impression on the heat suddenly evaporating off his skin. O’Hagen! O’Hagen had scammed him. But how? He wasn’t a fool, he hadn’t paid O’Hagen any money, quite the opposite. The painting...Which the police obviously knew about. “Yes, I’ve been there.”

“Recently?”

“Earlier this week actually. I think you know that, though, don’t you? I was having an item of mine valued for insurance purposes.”

“Was that item a painting?” Mandel asked.

“Yes.”

“And didn’t you also confirm its authenticity while you were there?”

“I suppose so, the assistant had to make sure it was genuine before she valued it. That’s standard.”

“And the painting definitely belongs to you?”

“It does.”

Mandel turned to Patterson. “Well, that’s true.”

“Of course it is, I was given it some time ago by Mr. O’Hagen,” Richard said. “It was a gift. He will confirm that.”

“I shall be very interested in talking to this Mr. O’Hagen,” Patterson said. “That’s if you can ever produce him for us.” She turned her cybofax around so Richard could see the screen, it held the image of *View of a Hill and Clouds*. “Is this the painting, Mr. Townsend?”

“Yes it is.”

“For the record, *View of a Hill and Clouds* by Sean McCarthy belongs to Byrne Tyler. The artist was a friend of the deceased. It was stolen from his apartment, presumably at the same time that he was murdered.”

“No,” Richard hissed. “Look, okay, listen. I’d never even heard of Firedrake until this week. Taking me on as a partner was a way of proving its viability to the banks. O’Hagen wanted a loan from them, that was the only way he could get it. We fixed it to look like I’d been a partner for two years.”

“Richard,” Jodie warned.

“I’m being set up,” he yelled at her. “Can’t you see?”

“Set up for what?” Patterson asked; she sounded intrigued.

“Byrne Tyler’s murder—that’s what I’m in here for, isn’t it? For Christ’s sake. O’Hagen’s rigged this so it looks like I was involved.”

“Why would Mr. O’Hagen want to do that to you?”

“I don’t fucking know. I’ve never met him before.”

“Mr. Townsend.”

Mandel’s voice made Richard lurch upright. “Yes?”

“You’ve never killed anyone yourself, but did you ever pay a man to eliminate somebody for you?”

Richard gaped at the psychic. In his head a panicked voice was yelling *oh shit oh shit oh shit*. Mandel would be able to hear it, to taste the wretched knowledge. His own shock-induced paralysis was twisting the emotion to an excruciating level. He thought his head was going to burst open from the stress.

Mandel gave him a sad, knowing smile and said: “Guilty.”

## Two — A Suspicious Fall

Detective Amanda Patterson had never visited Bisbrooke before. It was a tiny village tucked away along the side of a deep valley just outside Uppingham. Unremarkable and uneventful even by Rutland's standards, which made it a contender for dullest place in Europe. Until today, that is, when one of the uniforms had responded to a semi-hysterical call from a cleaning agency operative, and confirmed the existence of a body with associated suspicious circumstances.

The unseasonal rain beat down heavily as she drove over from Oakham, turning the road into a dangerous skid-rink. Then she had almost missed the turning off the A47. As it happened, that was the least of her navigational worries.

"Call him again," she told Alison Weston. The probationary detective was sitting in the passenger seat beside her, squinting through the fogged-up wind screen trying to locate some landmark.

"No way. Uniform will crap themselves laughing at us if I ask for directions," Alison complained. "It's got to be here somewhere. There can't be more than five buildings in the whole godforsaken village."

Amanda let it go. Hailstones were falling with the rain now, their impacts making clacking sounds on the car's bodywork. She braked at yet another T-junction.

Bisbrooke was woven together by a lace work of roads barely wide enough for a single vehicle. They all curved sharply, making her nervous about oncoming cars, and they were all sunk into earthen gullies topped with hedges of thick bamboo that had been planted to replace the long-dead privet and hawthorn of the previous century. With the rain and hail pummeling the wind screen, it was perilously close to driving blind. The only clue they were even in the village was the occasional glimpse of ancient stone cottages and brick bungalows huddled at the end of gravelled drives.

"You must be able to see the church," she said. The address they had been given was in Church Lane.

Alison scanned the swaying tops of the bamboo shoots. "No." She gave her cybofax an instruction, and it produced a satnav map with their location given as a small pink dot. "Okay, try that one, down there on the left."

Amanda edged the car cautiously along the short stretch of road where Alison was pointing. The tarmac was reduced to a pair of tire tracks separated by a rich swathe of emerald moss.

"Finally!" The junction ahead had a small street sign for Church Lane; a white-painted iron rectangle almost overgrown by a flamboyant purple clematis. This road was even narrower. It led them

past the village church, a squat building made from rust-colored stone that had long since been converted into accommodation units for refugee families.

The lane ran on past a big old farmhouse, and ended at a new building perched on the end of the village. Church Vista Apartments. Its design was pure Californian-Italian, completely out of place in the heart of rural England. Five luxury apartments sharing a single long building with a stable block and multi-port garage forming a courtyard at the rear. Climbing roses planted along the walls hadn't grown halfway up their trellises yet.

There was a tall security gate in the courtyard wall. Amanda held her police identity card up to the key, and it swung open for her. A police car and the cleaning agency van were parked on the cobbles beyond. Amanda drew up next to them. The rain was easing off.

They moved briskly over the cobbles to the door of apartment three. One of the uniforms was standing just inside, holding the heavy glass-and-wood door open. She didn't have to flash her card at him, as Rutland's police force was small enough for them all to know each other.

"Morning, Rex," she said as she hurried into the small hallway. He nodded politely as she shook the water from her jacket. "What have we got?"

"Definitely a corpse."

Alison slipped in and immediately blew her cheeks out. Her breath materialized in the air in front of her. "God, it's bloody freezing in here."

"Air-conditioning's on full," Rex said. "I left it that way, I'm afraid. Scene-of-crime, and all that."

"Good," Amanda muttered, not meaning it. The chill air was blowing over her wet clothes, giving her goosebumps.

Rex led them into the apartment. It was open-plan downstairs, a single space with white walls and terra-cotta tile flooring, Mexican blackwood cabinets and shelving were lined up around the edges. There were pictures hanging on every wall; prints, chalk and charcoal sketches, oils, watercolors, silver-patina photographs. Most of them featured young female nudes. Three big plump cream-colored leather settees formed a conversation area in the middle, surrounding a Persian rug. A woman in the cleaning agency's mauve tunic sat on one of the settees, looking shaken.

The front of the room was twice the height of the back. Wide wrought-iron stairs curved up to a balcony which ran the entire width, giving access to all the upstairs rooms. A sheer window wall in front of the balcony flooded the whole area with light.

The corpse lay at the foot of the stairs. A man in his mid-to-late

twenties, wearing a pale gray dressing gown, his legs akimbo on the tiles, head twisted at a nasty angle. Some blood had dribbled from his nose. It was dry and flaking now.

There were three air-conditioning grilles set in the edge of the balcony. One of them was right above the corpse, blowing a stream of the frosty air directly over him.

"He fell down the stairs?" Alison asked.

"Looks like it," Rex said.

"So was it a fall, or a push?" Amanda wondered out loud.

"I had a quick look around upstairs," Rex said. "No sign of any struggle. The main bed's been used, but everything seems to be in place as far as I can tell."

Amanda wrinkled her nose up. There was a faint smell in the air, unpleasant and familiar. "How long's he been here?"

"Possibly a day," Rex said.

Alison gestured at the window wall. "And nobody saw him?"

"One-way glass," Amanda said. It had that slight give away gray tint. She stared through it, understanding why the apartments had been built here. The last of the rain clouds had drifted away, allowing the hot sun to shine down. It was a magnificent view out over the junction of two broad rolling grassland valleys. In the distance she could see an antique windmill, its wooden sail painted white. A long communal garden stretched out ahead of her, a paddock beyond that. There was a circular swimming pool twenty meters away, surrounded by a flagstone patio. Wooden-slat sun loungers were clustered around stripy parasols.

"All right," she said wearily. "Let's do the preliminary assessment."

Alison opened her cybofax. "When was the body discovered?"

"Approximately 8:45 this morning," Rex nodded toward the cleaning woman. "Helen?"

"That's right," the woman stammered. "I saw him—Mr. Tyler—as soon as I came in. I called the police right away."

Amanda pursed her lips and knelt down beside the body. The handsome face had quite a few resonances for her. Byrne Tyler. She remembered him mainly from *Marina Days*, a soap set amid Peterborough's yachting fraternity—though 90 percent of it was shot in the studio with the all-action boating sequences cooked on a graphics mainframe. That had been five or six years ago; Byrne played a teenage hunk crewman. But he had left and gone onto star in action-thriller dramas and interactives. Pretty bad ones if she remembered her tabloid gossip right. There would be media attention with this one.

She stood up. "Helen, was the door locked when you arrived?"

“Yes. And the alarm was on. I have the code, and my palm is one of the keys. Mr. Tyler was happy with that. He was a nice man. He always gave me a Christmas bonus.”

“I’m sure he was lovely. Did you do all his cleaning?”

“Yes. Twice a week. Tuesday and Friday.”

“Which means he could have been here since Tuesday. She rubbed her arms, trying to generate some warmth. “Rex, go see if the air-conditioning was set like this or it’s glitched. Alison, look around for empty bottles, or anything else,” she said pointedly. It could so easily be an accident. Drunk, stoned, or even sober, a fall could happen. And God knows what a showbiz type like Tyler would take for amusement in the privacy of his secluded secure home.

Amanda went upstairs to check the main bedroom. The door was open, revealing a huge circular waterbed with a black silk sheet over the mattress: there was no top sheet. An equally large mirror was fixed to the ceiling above it. She shook her head in bemusement at the stereotyping. Exactly the kind of seduction chamber a list celebrity sex symbol was expected to have. She remembered most of his scenes in Marina Days involved him being stripped to the waist, or wearing tight T-shirts.

Apart from the offensive decor, there was nothing overtly suspicious. A slower look and she realized the sheet was rumpled, pillows were scattered about. She stared. One person wouldn’t mess up a bed that much, surely? On the bedside cabinet was a champagne bottle turned upside down in a silver ice bucket, a single cut-crystal flute beside it.

When she went back downstairs, Rex told her the air-conditioning was set at maximum. Alison was wearing plastic gloves; she held up a clear zip bag with a silver-plated infuser in it.

“Damn,” Amanda grunted. “Okay, call the scene-of-crime team, and forensic. Let’s find out exactly what happened here. And tell the uniform division we’ll need help to cordon off the area.”

Forty minutes later, Denzil Osborne drove up in the forensic team’s white van. Alone. Amanda always found Denzil immensely reassuring. It was probably the phlegmatic way the forensic officer treated crime scenes when he arrived. Nothing ever fazed him.

“Where’s the scene-of-crime team?” she asked as soon as he eased his huge frame out of the van.

“Vernon says he wants hard evidence there’s been a crime before he’ll authorize that kind of expense.”

Amanda felt her cheeks reddening. All those orders she’d snapped out in front of Alison were making her look stupid now, empty wishes showing where the true authority in the police force lay. England’s

police had got rid of the PSP political officers observing their cases for ideological soundness, only for the New Conservatives to replace them all with accountants. She wasn't sure which was worse.

“And the uniform division?”

He winked broadly. “You've got Rex, haven't you?”

“Sod it,” she snarled. “Come on, this way.”

Denzil took one look at Byrne Tyler's sprawled body and said: “Ah yes, I see why you wanted forensic now. Of course, I'm no expert, but I think he may have fallen down the stairs.”

She stuck her hands on her hips. “I want to know if he was pushed. I also want to know if he was even alive up on the balcony when it happened.”

Denzil put his case on the floor beside Tyler, and lowered his bulk down next to it, wincing as his knees creaked.

“And you should lose some weight,” she said.

“Come horizontal jogging with me—I'd lose kilos every night.”

“That's sexual harassment.” She just managed to keep a straight face in front of Alison.

He grinned wildly. “Yes please.”

“Just tell me what happened here.”

Denzil opened his case, revealing a plethora of specialist 'ware modules. He pulled on some tight plastic gloves before selecting a sensor wand which he waved over the dead man's face: then he stopped and peered closer. “Ah, a celebrity death. Best kind. Did you see his last? *Night Squad III: Descent of Angels*. Saving the world from card-carrying terrorists yet again. There was some cool helijets in that. They had nuclear-pumped X-ray lasers; cut clean thorough buildings.”

Chuckling, Denzil resumed his scan of Tyler's face. “Shame about the air-conditioning,” he said. “I can't work a simple temperature assessment on him.”

“That's what made me wonder,” Amanda said. “If he did get pushed then we won't be able to pinpoint the time very easily.”

“Hmm. Maybe not pinpoint, but let's try something a little more detailed.” Denzil replaced the sensor wand and took another cylinder from his case. It had a needle fifteen centimeters long protruding from one end, which Denzil slowly inserted into Tyler's abdomen then withdrew equally carefully. “Anything else immediately suspicious?”

Alison held up the zip bag with the infuser, and another bag with vials. “We think he was infusing this. Probably syntho.”

“Where have you been, young lady? I'll have you know, it's dream punch this season for the glitterati. Couple of levels up from syntho, it's supposed to stimulate your pleasure center and memories at the same time. Every hit a wet dream.”

“Can you walk around when you're tripping it?” Alison asked.



“Okay, good point. They normally just crash out and drool a lot.”

“I’ll need DNA samples from the bed as well,” Amanda said. “I think he had someone up there before he died.”

Denzil gave her a curious look. “Vernon won’t give you the budget for that kind of work over. I’m just authorized for a body analysis, determine cause of death, that kind of thing.”

“Just do what you can for me, okay.”

“Okay. CID’s paying.” The cylinder with the needle beeped, and he consulted the graphics displayed on its screen. “According to cellular decay, he died sometime on Wednesday night, between 2200 hours and 1:30.”

“That’s a big window. Is that the best you can give me?”

“I always give you my best, Amanda. That’s the preliminary, anyway. Let me get him into the lab and I can probably shave half an hour off that for you. The delay and this bloody arctic temperature doesn’t help.”

Amanda stood up and turned to Alison. “There’s some reasonable security ‘ware here. See what kind of records are available for this week, especially Wednesday evening. Rex, take a full statement from Helen, and let her go. And I want this place sealed as soon as the body’s removed. We’ll get authority to run a proper site examination eventually.”

“You really think this was a murder?” Denzil asked.

“Too many things are wrong,” Amanda said. “Somebody told me once: there’s no such thing as coincidence.”

Inspector Vernon Langley was putting his jacket on when Amanda walked into his small shabby office. He took one look at her, slumped his shoulders and groaned. “I’m due out for lunch,” he said defensively.

“I was due a scene-of-crime team,” she shot back.

“All right.” He sat back behind his desk and waved her into a spare seat. “Amanda, you know we’re severely restricted on how much we can spend on each case. Some syntho-head fell down stairs. Bag him up and notify the relatives.”

“I think he was murdered.”

Vernon grimaced. “Not the air-conditioning, please.”

“Not by itself, no. But Denzil scanned the control box. No fingerprints. It had been wiped clean with a damp kitchen cloth.”

“Means nothing. The cleaning lady could have done that on her last visit.”

“Unlikely. Vernon, you just don’t have the air-conditioning on that cold, not for days at a time. I also had Alison check the security ‘ware. A car left at 23:13, Wednesday night—a Rover Ingalo registered

to Claire Sullivan. It's loaded into Church Vista Apartments security list as an approved visitor for Byrne Tyler, so the gate opens automatically for it. Alison's mining the Home Office circuit for Sullivan now."

Vernon scratched at his chin. "I took a look at Denzil's preliminary file; time of death is very loose. This Sullivan woman will simply claim Tyler was alive when she left."

"Of course she will," Amanda said with a hint of irritation. "That doesn't mean we don't ask her."

Vernon looked unhappy.

"Oh, come on," she exclaimed.

"All right. I'll give you the time to interview her. But you don't get anything else without a positive result."

"Well, hey, thanks."

"I'm sorry, Amanda," he gave her a resigned smile. "Things just ain't what they used to be around here."

"Someone like Byrne Tyler is bound to have crime insurance coverage. We'll get the money to investigate properly. It won't even come out of your budget."

Vernon's mood darkened still further. "I'm sure he has coverage. Unlike seventy percent of the population."

Alison had tracked down Claire Sullivan's address, which was in Uppingham. She had also prepared quite a briefing file for Amanda, most of it mined from tabloid databases.

Amanda let the probationary detective drive to the Sullivan bungalow as she scanned the file on her cybofax. "Tyler was engaged to Tamzin Sullivan?"

"Yep, Claire's big sister. She's a model, got a contract with the Dermani house. Mainly on the back of the publicity she and Tyler were getting. They've hit the showbiz party trail extensively since the engagement was announced. You open your front door in the morning, and they'll be there for it. On their own, neither of them was important enough to get an image on the gossip 'casts; together they rate airtime. It helps that they have the same management agency."

Amanda looked at the image of Tamzin the screen was showing, posed for a Dermani advert, bracelet and earring accessories for a stupidly priced couture dress. The girl was beautiful, certainly, but it was a lofty beauty implying arrogance.

"So what's her little sister doing at her fiancé's house in the middle of the night?"

"One guess," Alison said dryly. "I always used to be jealous of my sister's boyfriends. And Byrne was no saint. I didn't load the real gutter-press reports for you, but they say he got fired from Marina

Days because he couldn't leave the girls alone.”

Amanda scrolled down the file to Claire. The girl was eighteen, a first-year medical student at DeMontfort University. Still living at home with her mother. The university fees were paid by her father as part of a child-maintenance agreement. He lived in Australia. Amanda skipped to the mother: Margina Sullivan.

Pre-judgment went against the nature of Amanda's training, but Margina's record made it difficult to avoid. She had three children, each with a different father each of whom was wealthy enough to support their offspring with independent schooling and an allowance. The Inland Revenue had no employment record for Margina Sullivan. Her tax returns (always filed late) listed a couple of small trust funds as her income source. She owned the bungalow in Uppingham where she lived along with Claire, Tamzin, and Daniel, her nine-year-old son; but her credit rating was dismal.

By the time they arrived at the address, an image of Margina had swollen into Amanda's mind, hardening like concrete: aging brittle harridan.

The Sullivan bungalow was just beyond the center of town, in the middle of a pleasant estate dominated by old evergreen pines which had survived the climate change. The wood and brick structure itself was well-maintained, with glossy paintwork and a roof of new solar panels, but the garden clearly hadn't seen any attention for years. Two cars were parked outside: a BMW so old it probably had a combustion engine, with flat tires and bleached paintwork hosting blooms of moss; next to it was a smart little scarlet and black Ingalo, a modern gig conductor powered runabout that was proving popular as a first car for wealthy young trendies.

Margina Sullivan opened the door. Amanda assumed they had caught her going out; she was wearing some extravagant dress complemented by a white shawl cardigan. Heavy makeup labored to re-create the youthfulness of what was undeniably an attractive face. Not a single bottle-red hair was out of alignment from her iron-hard curled beret style. She put a hand theatrically on her chest when shown Amanda's police ID card and *oohed* breathlessly. The phoney concern changed to shock and barely concealed anger when Amanda regretfully informed her of Byrne Tyler's death. Margina hurried over to the drinks cabinet and poured herself a large Scotch.

“How am I going to tell Tamzin?” she gulped. Another shot of whiskey was poured. “God in heaven, what are we going to do? *Starlight* was paying for a bloody wedding exclusive, not a funeral.”

A curious way of expressing grief, Amanda thought. She kept quiet, looking around the lounge. It was chintzy, with lavender cloths covering every table and sideboard, tassels dangling from their

overhanging edges. Figurines from the kind of adverts found in the most downmarket weekend datatext channels stood on every surface. Tall, high-definition pictures of Tamzin looked down serenely from each wall, campaigns for a dozen different fashion products. Amanda would have liked to be dismissive, but the girl really was very beautiful. Healthy vitality was obviously The Look right now.

Claire and Daniel came in, wanting to know what was happening. Amanda studied the younger girl as her perturbed mother explained. Claire didn't have anything like her elder sister's poise, nor was there much resemblance—which was understandable enough. She had sandy hair rather than lush raven; her narrow face had a thin mouth instead of wide full lips; and her figure was a great deal fuller than that of the lean athlete. Nor was there any of Tamzin's ice-queen polish, just a mild sulkiness.

Daniel was different again...wide-eyed and cute, with a basin-cut mop of chestnut hair. Like every nine-year-old, he could not stay still. Even when told of Tyler's death he clung to his sister and shivered restlessly. The affection between the siblings was touching. It was Claire who soothed and comforted him rather than his mother. Amanda's attitude hardened still further when Margina went for yet another shot of whiskey.

"Where is Tamzin at the moment?" Alison asked.

"Paris," Margina sniffed. "She has a runway assignment tonight. I must call Colin at Hothouse—they're her agents; he can arrange for her to be flown home. We'll release a statement on the tragedy from here."

"A statement?"

"To the media," Margina said irritably. "Hothouse will see to it."

"Perhaps you should call the Hothouse people now," Amanda said. "In the meantime I have some questions which I need to ask Claire."

Margina gave her a puzzled glance. "What questions?"

Amanda steeled herself. This wasn't going to be pleasant. She could do the preliminary interview with the girl here or at the station. Either way, Margina, and after that Tamzin, would find out why. I'm not a social worker, she told herself. "We think Claire might have been the last person to see Mr. Tyler alive."

"Impossible," Margina insisted. "You said he died at home." She rounded on Claire. "What does she mean?"

The girl hung her head sullenly. "I saw Byrne on Wednesday evening."

"Why?"

"Because he was screwing me," Claire suddenly yelled. "All right? He'd been screwing me for months. How the hell do you think I

bought my car? From the money my loving father gives me?" She burst into tears. Daniel hugged her tighter, and she gripped at him in reflex.

Margina's mouth opened. She stood absolutely still, staring at her daughter in disbelief. "You're lying. You little bitch. You're lying!"

"I am not!" Claire shouted back.

Amanda stepped between them, holding her hands up. "That's enough. Claire, you're going to have to come to the station with us."

The girl nodded.

"You could have ruined everything," Margina cried shrilly. "Everything! You stupid stupid bitch. You've got a whole university full of men to sleep around with. What the hell were you thinking of?"

"Don't you ever care about anyone but yourself? Ever? You don't know anything, you're just an ignorant old fraud."

"I said: enough," Amanda told them. "Mrs. Sullivan, we can arrange for a social case officer to counsel you and Tamzin if you would like."

Margina was still glaring at Claire, her breathing irregular. "Don't be absurd," she said contemptuously. "I'm not having a failed psychology graduate asking me impertinent questions as if I were some feeble-brained dole dependant. Colin will take care of everything we require."

"As you wish," Amanda said calmly.

Amanda decided to question the girl in her office rather than the station interview room. It was marginally less inhospitable. She got her a cup of tea, and even managed to find some biscuits in one of the desk drawers.

Claire didn't pay any attention, she sat with her head in her hands.

"Did you love him?" Amanda asked tenderly.

"Ha! Is that what you think?"

"I don't know. I'm asking."

"Of course I didn't love him." Her head came up abruptly, a worried expression on her face. "But I didn't kill him."

"Okay. So tell me why you were having a relationship with him?"

"It wasn't a relationship. He seduced me. I suppose. We'd gone to see Tamzin at a fashion show in Peterborough this Easter. He fixed it somehow that I was driven back home in his limo. It was just him and me. I'd had a lot to drink."

"Did he rape you?"

Claire gave a helpless grimace. "No. He was interested in me. That's never...Tamzin was always the one. She's always been the one. It's like she was born with two people's luck. Everything happens for

her. She's so pretty and glamorous. Byrne Tyler was her boyfriend. I mean, Byrne. I used to watch him on Marina Days."

"So you were flattered, and it was exciting."

"Suppose so."

"And afterward? Then what happened?"

"He said he wanted to keep seeing me."

"You mean to have sex?"

Claire blushed and hung her head. "Yes."

"So you went back? Voluntarily?"

"Mum's really frightened, you know? You wouldn't be able to tell, not with her. She doesn't let anyone see. But she is. We don't have any money; mum's in debt to dozens of shops, just for food half the time. We can't get credit anywhere locally anymore—no bank will issue her with a card. Tamzin...well she can look after all of us. Since she met Byrne her career is really taking off. She earns tons of money."

"So what did Byrne Tyler tell you?"

"He said to just keep things going the way they were. That he'd never tell Tamzin as long as he was happy, and everything would stay the same."

"And he bought you the car?"

"Yes. It was so I could drive out to Bisbrooke whenever he wanted me. He used to call me in the evenings, when Tamzin was away on an assignment. I'd tell mum I had late study at DeMontfort. It's not like she'd know any different."

"And you were there on Wednesday evening?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"When did you arrive?"

"About nine o'clock."

"And you left when?"

"Just after eleven."

"And Byrne Tyler was alive when you left?"

"Yes! I swear it. I left him in bed. I got dressed and went home."

"Was there anyone else there with you?"

"No. Just me."

"Claire, do you remember if it was cold in the apartment that night?"

"No. It never is. Byrne didn't like sheets or duvets on the bed. He always kept the bedroom warm enough so he didn't have to use them."

Amanda noted that in her cybofax. "Interesting. I need to know about the bedroom, I'm afraid. Did you have champagne up there that night?"

"Yes."

"We only found one glass. Isn't that a bit odd?"

"Oh." Claire looked hard at the top of the desk. "I have the glass. Byrne liked to...well, he poured some on me."

"I see. Did he say if he was meeting anyone else after you left?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"Had he met anyone before you arrived?"

"I don't know. He never said."

Amanda sighed, resisting the impulse to reach out and grip the girl's shoulder in reassurance. "Sounds like you've had a pretty rough few months."

"It wasn't that...I know it all sounds awful. He really liked me, though. You must think I'm some dreadful cheap tart."

"I don't think that at all. But what I'd like to do is refer you to a counsellor. I think you could do with someone to talk to right now."

"Maybe. Do I have to?"

"No. But I'd like you to think about it."

"I will. Can I go now?"

"Just about finished. I'll need a DNA sample from you to eliminate any traces we find at the apartment. After that you're free to go."

"Why do you need that?"

"Because this is now a murder investigation."

"Why is it murder?" Vernon asked.

"Claire claims the air-conditioning was operating normally when she left."

"Tyler could have changed it."

"We've been over this. That temperature isn't one you can live in. The only reason to change it is to fudge the time of the murder. And the controls were wiped. The murderer did that."

"All right, damnit. I've done some background datawork for you. He was insured by his management agenda and we now have reasonable doubt. I'll squirt the appropriate information off to them. We should get a response fairly quickly."

"Thank you. I'd like a scene-of-crime team to look at the apartment, and a full autopsy."

"I can give you that now."

"Great. I'll also need full access to all of Tyler's financial and personal data. Alison can start running it through some analysis programs."

"Okay, I'll have a magistrate sign the order this evening." Vernon fixed her with a thoughtful stare. "Did the girl do it?"

"She certainly had the motive. She was there around the time it happened. Unless we can put someone else at the scene, she's the obvious choice." She caught his troubled expression. "What?"

"I don't get it. She was smart enough to lower the temperature, so she must have realized everyone would find out she was sleeping with Tyler. Why not simply say he slipped, that it was an accident?"

"Guilt. Plain and simple. Trying to cover her tracks. You can see it in the way she talks. She's cautious about every word that comes out of her mouth, as if she'll give herself away just by speaking."

"Okay, Amanda, if you say so."

The next morning Amanda caught the Tyler story on Globecast's breakfast news. She was smoking an extremely illicit cigarette, trying to calm herself for the day to come. Tyler didn't rate much time: archive footage of him arriving at some glitzy party with Tamzin on his arm; the fact they were engaged, and she was believed to be flying home to be with her family; and a mention that the police investigation was ongoing, hinting that officers considered the circumstances unusual.

How do they find out so quickly? she wondered.

Amanda checked in at the station first, mainly to make sure there were no problems with Alison's analysis. The probationary detective gave her a grumpy look from behind her desk. Four terminal cubes were full of what looked like Inland Revenue datawork as she used her court access order to pull in details from his accountant, agent, solicitor and banks. Apparently Byrne Tyler's financial affairs were complex to the point of obscurity, not helped by the way showbusiness used accounting methods unknown to the rest of the human race. Amanda told her to concentrate on finding out if he had any large debts, and to confirm that he had bought the Ingalo for Claire.

With that part of the investigation on line she was ready to drive up to the apartment and supervise forensic's sweep. Vernon brought Mike Wilson to see her before she could get away. Wilson was from Crescent Insurance, who provided cover for Tyler. A real smoothy, she thought as they were introduced. Late thirties, in a smart blue-gray business suit at least two levels above a detective's price range, ginger hair neatly trimmed, a body he had kept in condition without being an obvious gym-rat. She didn't think he'd had any cosmetic alteration, his cheeks were slightly too puffy; but he certainly used too much aftershave.

"How much coverage did Tyler have?" she asked.

"His agency had taken out a full investigatory package," Mike Wilson said. "Whatever it takes to get the culprit into court and secure a conviction."

"Sounds good to me. Just give us your credit account details, we'll invoice you."



Wilson's smile was tolerant. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. We like to see first hand what our money is being spent on."

She gave Vernon a tight you're-kidding-me look. He smiled in retaliation. "Mike Wilson will be assigned to your team for the duration of the investigation."

"As what?"

"I have worked on a number of police cases," Wilson said. "I appreciate you don't want what you regard as outside interference—"

"Bloody right I don't."

"—however, the facts are that I can offer immediate access to considerable specialist resources such as forensic labs and database mining, which the police have to outsource anyway. And I'm certainly happy to finance any reasonable police deployment, like the scene of crime search. That goes without question."

"How active do you see your helpful role?"

"I only offer advice when I'm asked for it. It's your investigation, Detective."

Her terminal beeped for attention. Mike Wilson and Vernon Langley watched expectantly. Without making too big a deal of it, Amanda sat behind her desk and pulled the call through. It was Denzil.

"I have good news and good news," he said. "From your point of view anyway, if not Byrne Tyler's."

"What did you find?"

"Narcotic toxicology was minimal, except for a very recent infusion of Laynon. Our boy was improving his bedtime performance that night, but nothing more. But there were plenty of residual traces. He's a regular and longtime user of several proscribed drugs. However he didn't have enough of anything in his bloodstream to impede locomotion or cause disorientation at the time he died."

"The champagne?"

"Minimal alcohol level, he couldn't have drunk more than half a glass."

"Thanks, Denzil. What else?"

"Dried saliva trails on his skin. And small scrapings of skin under two fingernails."

"They must be from Claire." She glanced up at Mike Wilson, raising an eyebrow. He gave a small bow. "Run a DNA comparison for me, Denzil."

"Yeah, I heard we got money." His image vanished from the screen.

Wilson gave Vernon a meaningful look. "If it is the sister, the tabloid channels are going to have a feeding frenzy."

Amanda made an effort at conversation on the drive up to Bisbrooke. It wasn't that Wilson was unlikable; but her instinct was that he had no place on the investigation. Of course, intellectually, she appreciated his presence was due to social injustice rather than politics. External funding was a factor she would have to accept, especially in the future.

With the body gone and the air-conditioning back to normal, the apartment had lost its cheerless quality. Two scene-of-crime officers were moving methodically through the ground floor, examining every surface with a variety of sensor wands. Rex was out in the courtyard, taking statements from the neighbors.

"What do you need to move for a prosecution?" Mike Wilson asked as they took a look at the cast-iron stairs.

"Basically, a lack of any other suspects. I expect the prosecution service will accept she changed the air-conditioning. She is a medical student, after all."

"So you'll interview his friends to see if anyone threatened him?"

"Friends, his agency, people he worked with. The usual. I'd love to try and track down his supplier, as well. But that would really cost you—they don't exactly rush out of the woodwork at times like these."

He gave a small grin. "I know."

"Previous case?"

"Crescent insures a lot of celebrity types. Having dealt with them before, I can see why we set the premiums so high."

"Really?" Amanda was wondering if he was going to let any gossip loose when her cybofax bleeped. Denzil's face appeared on the screen with an indecently malicious expression. "What?" she asked cautiously.

"The saliva is Claire's. The skin under the fingertips is not."

"Oh bugger," she groaned. Even so, some part of her was glad Claire had possibly been cleared. Although she was still convinced the girl was hiding something. "Run a match through the central criminal records at the Home Office." She didn't even consult Mike Wilson with that one.

"Already running," Denzil said. "Plot getting thicker, huh?"

"Yeah, right." She ended the call.

Wilson was looking up at the top of the stairs. "So what do you think? Skin scrape from whoever pushed him."

"Looks that way. One last desperate grasp as he started to fall." She walked over to the red outline of the body on the terra-cotta tiles, and turned a full circle. "So what else have we got? No sign yet of a forced entry, which implies either the security 'ware let them through or it was a professional hit and they could burn through the system without a trace."

“Pushing someone off the top of the stairs isn't a widely used assassination method. It's heat-of-the-moment. Which fits.”

“Fits what?”

“Someone turned up just after Claire left. A friend, or someone he knew. He let them in. There was an argument. It would also explain the air-conditioning. If it was a professional hit, then whoever did that wouldn't need to confuse the time of death, it wouldn't matter to them. For some reason, our murderer still cares about messing with the time.”

“Still doesn't fit. If it was a friend, then the security 'ware would have an admissions record. There was nobody.”

“We'd better have it checked very thoroughly, then. Get into the base management program and see if there's any sign of tampering.”

Amanda nodded. “You have somebody who can do that?”

“Oh yes.”

“While they're at it, make sure they enhance the surveillance picture of the Ingalo when it left, I'd like to confirm no one was inside along with Claire.”

“Fair enough. What else do you need?”

She gestured out of the window wall. “Unless it was a real professional who yomped in over the fields, the only way to get here is to drive through the village. And believe me, that's not so easy. Bisbrooke is small, and confusing. The villagers would know all about strange cars. I want a door-to-door enquiry asking if any of them saw anything that night, any cars they didn't recognize, as well as full interviews with the neighboring apartments.”

“That's a lot of labor-intensive groundwork. Could we just wait and see if the DNA register comes up with anything first?”

“Okay. We need the other angle anyway. This will give us some time.”

“Other angle?”

“The motive, Mike. Personal, or financial, or professional jealousy, whatever...We need to start the good old-fashioned process of elimination. So, you get your expert here to examine the security 'ware, and I'll get back to the station and give Alison a hand with Tyler's finances.”

It was late afternoon when Alison slapped a hand down on her terminal keyboard with a disgusted sigh, canceling a search program. “He doesn't have bloody finances, you've got to have money for that. All Tyler has are debts.”

Which wasn't strictly true. Amanda glanced at Tyler's bank statement again. To think, she always worried about her monthly salary payment arriving in time to satisfy her standing orders and

credit-card bill. Some people obviously operated on a higher plane. Although he owed close to quarter of a million New Sterling, the banks just kept extending his credit limit. Why he didn't pay it off she couldn't understand. His cashflow was more than adequate. Of course, neither she nor Alison could track down where half of the money actually came from, and in most cases where it went. One account at a bank in Peterborough was used just for withdrawing large sums of hard cash.

Amanda looked over at Mike Wilson who was studying some of the details himself. "I think we might justifiably request a qualified accountant at this point."

He ran a hand back through his hair, looking at a twisting column of numbers in one of the cubes with a perplexed expression. "I think you might be right."

Denzil came in and grinned at the blatant despondency in the room. "Having fun?"

"Always," Alison said sweetly.

"I have a positive result."

Amanda sat up fast. "What?"

"The skin scrape is definitely nobody we know of. No record of that DNA in the Home Office memory core. I even squirted the problem over to Interpol. They don't have it either. And before you ask, neither does the FBI." He gave Wilson an affable smile. "You'll get the bill tomorrow."

"I live for it."

"You want me to look elsewhere? Most countries will cooperate."

"I think we'll have to," Amanda said. "After all, that DNA is our murderer. Mike?"

"I agree. Although, I'd like to suggest widening the search parameters."

"How?"

"Organizations such as Interpol and the FBI simply store the DNA of known criminals. If it were a professional hit, I'd say search every police memory core on the planet. However, we favor the theory that this was a heat-of-the-moment killing, do we not?"

"I can go with that," she said.

"Then our murderer is unlikely to be listed."

"It was always a long shot, but what else can we do?" She pointed at the cubes full of financial datawork. "If we can find a motive, we can track the murderer that way."

"Crescent has a DNA-characteristics assembly program. I suggest we use that."

Denzil whistled quietly. "I'm impressed."

"I might be," Amanda said. "If I knew what you were talking

about.”

“The genes which make us what we are, are spaced out along the genome, the map of our DNA,” Mike Wilson said. “Now that we know which site designates which protein or characteristic, like hair color or shape of the ear, it's possible to examine the genes which contribute to the facial features and see what that face will look like.”

“You mean you can give me a picture of this person?” Amanda asked.

“Essentially, yes. We can then ask Tyler's friends and acquaintances if they recognize him...or her.” He waved a hand at the busy terminal cubes. “Got to be easier than this, quicker, too. Crescent can also run standard comparison programs with the visual images stored in our data cores, and with the security departments of all the other companies we have reciprocal arrangements with. I think you'll find they're considerably more extensive than the criminal records held by governments. For a start, between us, the insurance companies have copies of every driving license issued in Europe. And we already decided the murderer drove to Bisbrooke.”

Amanda studied him. This was suddenly too easy. Something was wrong, and she couldn't define it...apart from an intuitive distrust she had for the corporate machinator. And yet, he was helping. Solving the crime, in all probability. “How long will it take?”

“If we courier a sample of the DNA over to Crescent's lab in Oxford this evening, the program can crunch the genome overnight. We can have the picture by morning.”

“Okay. Do it.”

Amanda hated working Sundays. No way around it this week, though. And maybe, just maybe, she might get overtime, courtesy of Crescent.

When she arrived at the station there was an unusually large crowd of people in the main CID office for the time and day, uniform division as well as detectives. Alison gave Amanda a wry smile as she came in.

“The scene-of-crime team found something interesting,” she said in a low voice, suggesting conspiracy. “No shortage of volunteers to go over this lot for us.”

“What?” Amanda asked. She edged through the group to look at the flatscreen they were all absorbed with. It was a split-screen image, three viewpoints of the main bedroom in Byrne Tyler's apartment. Tyler himself was on the bed with a girl, their naked bodies writhing in animal passion.

Alison held up a carton full of memox crystals. “There's a lot of them. Over sixty.”

“Okay.” Amanda walked over to the AV player and switched it off. “That’s enough. This is supposed to be a bloody police station, not a porno shop.”

They moaned, one or two jeered, but nobody actually voiced a complaint. The group broke up, filing out of the CID office with sheepish grins and locker room chuckles.

“They found three cameras in there yesterday,” Alison said. “Quite a professional recording setup. Looks like Tyler was something of an egotistical voyeur.”

“Was he recording Wednesday night?” Amanda asked sharply. At least that explained why he didn’t have a top sheet on his bed, she thought.

“No. Or at least, there was no memox of it. The AV recorder the cameras are rigged to was empty.”

“Pity.”

Alison rattled the carton. “Plenty more suspects: all the husbands and boyfriends.”

The little black cylinders rolled about. Ten-hour capacity each. Amanda found herself doing mental arithmetic. Assuming they were even half-full, Tyler had been a very busy boy. Popular, too. “Is there an index?”

“Yes.” Alison flourished a ziplock bag containing several sheets of paper. “In ink no less—I guess he didn’t want to risk this list getting burned open by a hotrod. Mostly just first names, but he got some surnames as well; and they’ve all got dates. They go back over two years. There’s quite a few personalities I recognize.”

“Okay, scan the list in to your terminal and run the names through a search program. Then see if a visual-characteristics recognition program can identify the girls we don’t have full names for. I want to know where all of them live, if they’re married or have long-term partners, parents of the younger ones, that kind of thing. Oh, and check to see if the crystals are there.”

Mike Wilson walked in past the last of the uniform division. His expression was bleak. “What did I miss?” he inquired.

“Tyler liked to record himself in bed,” Alison said. “We found the crystals.”

“Oh, shit. We’d better keep that quiet.”

Amanda frowned. Not quite the response she expected. “I was planning on it,” she said. “How did the DNA characteristics assembly go?”

He flipped open a shiny chrome Event Horizon executive cybofax and gave it an instruction. A young man’s face appeared, light brown hair, greenish eyes, a thin nose, broad mouth. There was a small digital read-out in the corner of the screen saying: 18 YEARS. It

started to wind forward. The man began to change, aging. Wrinkles appeared, the cheeks and neck thickened; the hairline receded, gray streaks appeared. The display finished at eighty years, showing a wizened face with shrunken cheeks plagued by liver spots, and wisps of silver-white hair.

"Denzil was right," Amanda said. "That's impressive. Just how accurate is it?"

"Perfectly accurate."

"You sound unhappy."

"There was no positive match."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, we got hundreds of people who share eighty-five to ninety percent similarity. We just captured an image from every five years of his life and the computer ran a standard visual comparison reference program for each of them. In total we have access to pictures of two hundred twenty-five-million Caucasian males. Can you believe it? Nothing over ninety percent."

Amanda couldn't work out if she was disappointed or not. Mike Wilson had sounded so sure this was the solution, and now for all the astonishing technology and corporate data cores they had to revert to humble police work. "Give us the top twenty off your list, and we'll start to work through them, check if they knew Tyler, alibis, the usual. English residents to start with, please."

"Okay," he acknowledged the request with a subdued nod. "Who the hell did this? The only way this murderer could elude our programs is with major plastic surgery, changing his appearance."

"Someone in showbusiness, then," Alison said brightly.

"The percentage is a lot higher among celebrities than the rest of the population. They're always improving their appearance."

"Could be." Uncertainty was a strong presence in his voice.

"Alison, that can be your priority," Amanda said. "We'll turn Tyler's finances over to a professional accountant. That'll free us to interview friends and colleagues, see if any of them recognize this picture." Her finger tapped the cybofax screen. "I'll start with the Sullivans. You concentrate on his fellow celebrities."

Amanda was just going out the station door when she caught sight of a silhouette in the reception area, a man talking to the desk sergeant. "Greg?"

Greg Mandel turned round. His eyes narrowed for a second, then he grinned. "Amanda Patterson, right? Detective sergeant?"

She shook the hand he offered. "Detective, now."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. So what are you doing here?"

"Checking on a vehicle accident. One of Eleanor's family was hurt."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Any luck?"

"None at all."

"Yeah, well, you know how the police force works. Traffic doesn't get the highest priority these days. Want me to pull any strings?"

"No. That's okay, thanks. I guess CID's pretty busy with the Tyler case. I saw it on the news."

"Yeah. It's my case, too." She glanced from Greg back to Mike Wilson who was standing waiting politely. Asking never hurt, she thought, and she'd had a reasonable relationship with Greg during an earlier case when he'd been appointed as a special adviser to Oakham's CID. "Look, Greg, I realize this probably isn't the best time to ask you, but the Tyler case is really a ball-breaker for me. We're hitting a lot of stone walls."

"Uh huh." Greg's expression became reluctant, trying to work out how to extricate himself.

"Just sit in on one interview, Greg, that's all I need. I've got a suspect I'm not sure about. How about it? You can cut straight through all the usual crap and tell me if she's on the level. We can even pay you a fee. Mike here is from Crescent Insurance, they're picking up the tab for Tyler."

Greg and Mike eyed each other suspiciously.

"What exactly is your field?" Mike asked.

"I have a gland," Greg said mildly.

Amanda enjoyed the discomfort leaking over Mike Wilson's face. She'd endured the same feeling the first time she met Greg; every guilty memory rushing to the front of her mind.

"I thought we'd cleared Claire?" Mike Wilson protested.

"She was at the apartment very close to the time," Amanda said. "And I know she's holding something back. That's why I need a psychic, to see where I'm going wrong. If I knew the right questions to ask her I bet we could take some big steps forward."

Mike Wilson clearly wanted to object; just didn't have the nerve.

"Detective's intuition, huh?" Greg asked.

"Must be catching," she told him spryly.

He consulted his watch. "Okay. I can give you an hour. But I'll have to call Eleanor first, let her know where I am."

She couldn't resist it. "Under the thumb, Greg—you?"

His smile was bright and proud. "Certainly am, I have two women in my life now. Christine is six months old."

"Oh, I didn't know. Congratulations."

"Thanks."



Amanda and Mike Wilson took it in turns to brief Greg on the case as they drove out to Uppingham. Just before they got to the roundabout with the A47 at Uppingham, Greg said: "I'd like to take a look at the apartment first."

"Why is that necessary?" Wilson asked.

"It's best if I can get a feel for the event," Greg said. "Sometimes my intuition can be quite strong. It might help with the interview."

They pulled up in Church Vista's courtyard. Greg got out and looked round, head tilted back slightly as if he was sniffing at the air. Wilson watched him, but didn't comment. There was a police seal on the door to apartment three, which Amanda's card opened.

Greg went over to the red outline at the foot of the stairs. "What was the result from the security 'ware?"

"As far as we can tell it's clean," Mike Wilson said. "If it was tampered with, then whoever did it covered their tracks perfectly."

"Hmm." Greg nodded and started to walk round, glancing at the coffee table with its spread of glossy art books.

"We've collected statements from all the neighbors now," Amanda said. "None of them heard or saw any other car arriving or departing that night. It was only Claire and the Ingalo. And we've received the enhanced images from the security camera by the gates. She was the only person in it coming in and out."

"Well, I can appreciate your problem," Greg said. He was walking along the wall, examining the pictures one at a time. "Circumstances make it look like a professional hit, but pushing Tyler down the stairs is strictly a chance killing."

"Tell me," Amanda muttered. "We know there was someone else here, we even know what they look like. But everything else we've got says it's Claire."

"Can I see the image you assembled from the genome data?"

Mike Wilson flipped open his cybofax and showed Greg the image while it ran through its eighteen-to-eighty lifecycle.

"Doesn't ring any psychic bells," Greg said. He stopped beside the smallest painting on the wall, a picture of a hill with a strange object in the air above it. "This is a bit out of place, isn't it?" The pictures on either side were colored chalk sketches of ballerinas clad only in tutus.

"Is that relevant?" Wilson asked as he slipped the cybofax back in his jacket pocket. He was beginning to sound more positive, overcoming his apprehension of the gland and its reputation.

"Probably not," Greg admitted. He led them up the stairs into the bedroom. The crime scene team had tagged the three cameras that were discreetly hidden within elaborate picture frames, the units no bigger than a coat button. Slender fiber-optic threads buried in the plaster linked them to an AV recorder deck in a chest of drawers.

“And you say there's no sign of a struggle?” Greg asked.

“No. The only thing messed up was the bed.”

“Right.” He stood in the door, looking at the top of the stairs. “If it was a professional hit, then the murderer could have waited until just after Claire had left, then thrown Tyler down the stairs. That would disguise the fact it was a hit, which would stop us looking for anyone else with a motive. Was Tyler alive when he fell?”

“The autopsy says yes. The impact snapped his neck, he was killed instantly.”

“What about bruising or marks? If he was alive when he was forced to the stairs he would have put up some kind of struggle.”

“No bruising,” Amanda said.

“That doesn't necessarily follow,” Mike Wilson said. “He'd only struggle if he realized what was happening. If the murderer made out he was a burglar and made him walk to the stairs with a gun to his head he wouldn't have fought back.”

Greg pulled a face, looking from the bed to the stairs. “Yeah, this is all possible, but very tenuous. The simplest explanation is usually the correct one.” He went over to the chest of drawers, and bent down to study the AV recorder, fingertips tracing the slender optical threads back into the skirting board. “How old is this place?”

“The apartment was finished two and a half years ago,” Amanda said. “Tyler moved in just over two years ago.”

“So he probably had it wired up then,” Greg said. “How much did the apartment cost him?”

“Five hundred and fifty thousand New Sterling. There's over four hundred thousand outstanding on the mortgage. He was late with several payments.”

“So he doesn't own it. I thought he was rich.”

“By our standards he's loaded. But he had one hell of a lifestyle, and he didn't star in that many action interactives. Strictly C-list when it comes to the celebrity stakes. He's definitely short of hard cash.”

Greg went over to the bed, running a hand along the edge of the mattress. “Did he make any recordings of himself with Claire?”

“I'm not sure,” Amanda said. “Let me check if Alison's loaded the list in yet.” She opened her cybofax and linked in to the station 'ware. “We're in luck, she's just finished it. Let's see...Yes, there's three crystals of Claire.”

“When was the last one dated?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Why the interest?” Mike Wilson asked.

“That's a lot of recording time for one girl,” Greg said. “And Claire doesn't come over here that often, or stay long when she does. That suggests he records every time. So why didn't he record last

Wednesday night?"

"He did," Amanda said instinctively. She could see where he was going with this. "And the murderer took the memox crystal because he was caught by the cameras in here. Which implies that whoever the murderer is, he struck very quickly after Claire left. So close the recorder was still on."

"No messing," Greg said.

Tamzin Sullivan had returned home. When Amanda, Greg and Mike Wilson were shown into the bungalow, the bereaved girl was sitting in the lounge. To show her grief at the loss of her future husband she was wearing traditional black in the form of a less traditional micro dress with a deep scoop-top. Colin, from Hothouse, was fussing around with her mother while a seamstress made last minute adjustments to the shoulder straps, a makeup artist was finishing off the girl's face.

It was Claire who had answered the door and ushered them in. As soon as the sisters glanced at each other the atmosphere chilled to a level below that Tyler's apartment had ever reached. Daniel, who was lurking behind the sofa, shrank away from the visitors.

"This is not an appropriate time for you to be here," Margina said imperiously. "The *Starlight* crew will be here any minute."

"I apologize for interrupting you at what is undoubtedly a difficult time," Amanda said; it was her best official sympathy voice. She marveled she could manage to keep it irony-free. "But I'm afraid we do have some questions for Tamzin, and Claire again. We'll be brief."

Tamzin glanced at Colin, who gave a small nod.

"I'll help in whatever way I can," Tamzin said. "I want Byrne's murderer caught. Have you found the piece of scum yet?" Her gaze flicked pointedly to her sister.

"We have a possible suspect."

Mike Wilson showed her his cybofax, running the image. "Do you recognize this man? We think Byrne knew him."

Tamzin leaned forward with considerable interest, fabric straining. Amanda saw Wilson's glance slither helplessly down to her cleavage, and prayed hard no one else had seen.

"No. I don't."

He went onto show the image to Margina, Claire, and even Colin. They all said they had never seen the man before.

"What about threats?" Amanda asked. "Do you know if anyone was being abusive to him recently?"

"No," Tamzin said. "There was nothing like that. He did have a few crank callers, everyone as famous as us has them; but the agency

screened them for him."

"I'd like a record of them, please," she told Colin.

"I'll get it squirted over to you," he promised.

"Thank you. Greg, anything you need to know?"

"The pictures in your fiancé's apartment are interesting," Greg said. "How long's he been buying them?"

Tamzin blinked, slightly baffled. "Since he moved in, I suppose. Byrne appreciated fine art, music, culture; he wasn't just an action hero, you know. He was friends with a lot of people in the media and arts. Inspiring people. He was even writing a script for a drama that we would star in together. Now that's talent."

"Yes, I'm sure. The pictures are all original, aren't they?"

"They're Byrne's collection," Tamzin said in pique. "Of course they're original."

"I see. Thanks."

Amanda had somehow expected more; she had seen Greg interview suspects before. When he didn't ask anything else, she said: "I'd like to talk to Claire alone for a moment, please."

Margina's face tightened in fury; she gave her youngest daughter a warning glare as she stalked out. Tamzin didn't even bother with that; she ignored everyone as she left. It was Colin who was left to take Daniel's hand and lead the lad away.

Claire slumped down petulantly into the sofa. She was wearing an oversize rouge T-shirt and baggy black jeans; cloaking while Tamzin exhibited. Always opposites. "Now what?"

"I really will be brief," Amanda said. "This is going to be personal, I'm sorry. Did you know about Tyler's obsession with recording events in his bedroom?"

"You've found the memox crystals?" Claire asked in a small voice.

"Yes, we did."

"I knew you would. Byrne liked me to watch them with him. He enjoyed the ones of him with famous people. There were a lot; actresses and singers, socialites, people like that. I know it was all wrong, but one more bad thing on top of all the rest didn't seem to matter much, not by then."

"Do you know if he was recording the pair of you that night?"

"I don't know. I knew he did sometimes. I didn't ask. I never wanted to think about stuff like that."

Amanda took a quick look at Greg, who was watching impassively. There was no clue as to what he saw with his sixth sense. "Thank you, Claire. I know that wasn't easy. I'd just like to go back to that night one more time. Did you see or hear anything unusual there?"

"No. I told you already, there was nothing different."

"Not even with Byrne—he wasn't acting oddly?"

"No."

"He didn't do anything that made you angry, or upset?"

"No! Why are you asking this? You think I did it, don't you? I didn't! I didn't! Tamzin thinks I did. Mum hates me. I didn't want any of this. You think I did?" Tears were starting to slide down her cheeks. She wiped at them with the back of a hand, sniffing loudly.

"Okay, Claire, I'm sorry. And you're sure you didn't recognize the man Mike showed you on the cybofax?"

"Yeah, I've never seen him. Who is he?"

"I wish we knew."

As soon as they all got back into Amanda's car, she turned to Greg. "Well?"

"Claire's telling the truth. She didn't kill him."

"God damn it! I'm sure she knows something about this."

"Not that I could sense. She certainly didn't recognize the killer's face, there was nothing odd about the apartment that night, and Byrne was behaving normally. You're going to have to come at it from a different angle."

"Shit." She faced forward and gripped the steering wheel. "It has to be someone with a big vicious grudge eating at them."

"The murderer knew all about the cameras," Greg said. "Not that Tyler exactly kept it a secret. That makes it more likely to be a jealous boyfriend or husband of some girl that Tyler's had up there."

"Then why the hell can't we find a match for his face?"

"We'll get him," Mike Wilson said. "It's just a question of time now."

"Yeah, right." She switched on the power cell, and drove off. "Sorry to waste your time, Greg."

"I don't think you did," he said cautiously. "There's something not quite right about the crime scene. Don't ask what, it's just a feeling. I just know something's wrong there. It might come to me later; these things normally take time to recognize. Can I give you a call?"

"Please!"

"Thanks. So what's your next step?"

"Work through his friends and acquaintances, and the girls on the crystals. See if any of them recognizes the murderer. Just a hell of a lot of datawork correlation, basically."

Making sense out of Byrne Tyler's twisted finances was one of Amanda's biggest priorities. She had emphasized that often enough to Vernon and Mike Wilson, both of whom assured her of their total agreement. But there was no accountant waiting for her on Monday

morning when she arrived at the station. Mike Wilson was in full apology mode, explaining that the person he had asked to be assigned to the Tyler case was finishing off another audit. "But he'll have completed that by tomorrow at the latest."

"You mean he'll be here tomorrow?"

"I would assume so." He handed her a memox crystal. "Peace offering. This came in from Tyler's agency. It's an index of all his professional contacts, people he's worked with over the last eighteen months. They've also got records of his crankier fans."

Amanda gave the crystal a mistrustful glance; the number of people they were going to have to interview was expanding at an exponential rate. She went into the office to see what progress Alison had made identifying the girls on the memox crystals.

It was considerable. Amanda's eyebrows quirked several times as she ran down the list. For an ex-soap star he had an astonishing sex appeal. How he got to meet so many women in such a short time (during his engagement), and have such a success rate was beyond her. Sure he was boyishly handsome, and kept himself in top physical shape...They started to draw up an interview schedule. Most of it would have to be done over the phone; the preliminary inquiry, anyway.

Vernon called her into his office at 8:40, requesting a full briefing. He was appearing on Radio Rutland soon to explain the case to the public. The police station had been receiving a steady stream of requests from the media, which had doubled since *Starlight's* interview and pictures of a mourning Tamzin had appeared on the datatext channels last night.

There wasn't much she could give him. They certainly weren't going to announce the failure of the characteristics assembly program to find the murderer. Vernon would just have to stick to confirming the investigation team was "progressing"; that anything else at this time could prejudice the case. He departed for the studio, fidgeting with his tie and collar.

Greg Mandel called her mid-morning, and asked to have a look around the apartment again. She agreed to meet him up there, glad for the break. The women on Alison's list that she'd called so far were uniformly apprehensive when they found out what the enquiry was about, brittle facades hiding real fear of discovery. It was a shabby process, leaving her feeling depressed and less than wholesome.

Greg's big EMC Ranger was waiting outside Church Vista's courtyard gates when she arrived.

"Any clue what you're looking for yet?" she asked when they went inside.

"Sorry, no. I guess I'm just here chasing phantoms." He tapped a

finger on the rim of the glass and wood door leading out to the courtyard. “Logically, we ought to start with the point of entry. Do you have an idea where the murderer came in?”

Amanda flipped her cybofax open, and consulted the report from the scene-of-crime team. “No. According to the security 'ware logs, the main door here was opened at 21:12 hours with a duplicate card issued by Tyler, that's two minutes after the 'ware recorded the Ingalo driving in through the gates—which matches up with Claire's arrival. Then it was opened again at 23:09, from the inside, when she left.”

“What's the security system like?”

“Good quality 'ware, standard application. All the doors and windows are wired up, and the log function records every time they open and close; motion and infrared sensors, voice codeword panic mode with a satellite link to a private watchdog company. I'd be happy here.”

“Sounds foolproof.” Greg walked across the ground floor to the big window wall. Broad patio doors were set into it, to the left of the stairs. “What about this one?”

“It's a manual lock, you can only open it from the inside. There isn't even a catch outside.” Amanda glanced at the log again. “That was closed from 1900 hours onward.” She followed after him as he went into the kitchen, which overlooked the courtyard. All the marble worktops were clean, there was nothing out of place, no food stains, tall glass storage pots of dried pasta unopened, spice jars full; even the line of potted ferns on the windowsill were aesthetic, healthy and well-watered. It was as though the whole place had been transplanted direct from a showroom. The band of windows above the sink had two sections which could open. Both had solid manual-key security bolts. Greg didn't even have to ask. “They haven't been opened for ages,” she told him. “Not since June, actually.”

There was a cloakroom next door; emerald-green ceramic tiles halfway up the walls, cool whitewashed plaster carrying on up to the ceiling. A hand basin at one end, toilet at the other with a small window just above it, four panes of fogged glass. Greg went over and looked at it. The top half of the frame was open a crack, its iron latch on the first notch. When he lifted the catch and pushed it open further the hinges creaked, protesting the movement.

“My cat couldn't get through that,” Amanda said.

“Fat cat,” Greg replied. “What about upstairs?”

Main bedroom, the bathroom, and both guest bedrooms all had wide windows equipped with security bolts. Out of the ten which opened, the security bolts were unfastened or loose on three, leaving just the standard latch to deter burglars.

“How would they get up to them?” Amanda asked skeptically

when they finished checking the last guest bedroom.

"I've used wallwalker pads in my army days," Greg said. "And I'm not sure how strong those trellises outside are, maybe they'd act like a ladder."

"Security log says they stayed closed. You want me to run forensic checks on the external wall?"

"Not particularly. If you have the technical expertise to circumvent window sensors, then you can walk straight in through the main door."

Amanda's cybofax beeped. She accepted a call from Mike Wilson. The accountant definitely wouldn't be available before Wednesday—did she want to wait, or get someone else in? One was available for Tuesday, but Wilson hadn't worked with him before. Amanda scratched irritably at her forehead; as Crescent was paying, she wanted results quickly, and, to her, one accountant was no different from any other. She said to get one in for Tuesday morning, first thing. It didn't matter who.

"No progress on finding a match for the murderer's face," Mike Wilson said. "And you won't believe how many of Tyler's showbiz pals have had discreet trips to the surgeon. It doesn't help our visual comparison programs."

She finished the call and went off to find Greg. He was downstairs again, crouching over the red body outline. "I've been thinking about motive," he said. "All we've come up with so far is jealousy."

"The accountant's in tomorrow—maybe we'll find a big debtor."

"Could be, except the kind of debt that drives someone to kill isn't normally one you'll find on the books. And killing someone means you never get paid."

She glanced around at the paintings. Tyler had spent a lot of money on them, no matter how questionable his taste. "You think they stole something?"

"We know it had to be a professional who broke in here. It could have been someone trying to reclaim a debt the hard way. Maybe the death was an accident after all. What we have is a burglar who hadn't done enough research on his target to know Claire was making nighttime visits. I mean, they certainly kept it quiet enough. Tyler was awake when he wasn't supposed to be."

"Could be," she said.

"Crescent Insurance must have a list of his paintings; it's simple enough to check they're all here."

"Okay. We'll try that."

"Sorry I can't come up with anything more concrete." He made his way out, stopping to take one last look at the small odd painting. Frowning. Then left with a rueful wave.



Amanda used her cybofax to connect directly into Crescent's memory core, and requested Tyler's home contents file. Greg was wrong. All the insured paintings were there. Amazingly the most expensive one was *View of a Hill and Clouds*. She paused in front of it, not quite believing what she was seeing was worth 20,000 New Sterling. Art, she thought, just wasn't for people like her.

The accountant did arrive on Tuesday morning. He had brought three customized cybofaxes and a leather wallet full of memox crystals loaded with specialist financial analysis programs. His assiduous preparation, eagerness, and self-confidence did a lot to offset the fact that he looked about eighteen. Amanda assigned Alison to assist him.

Greg turned up at the station just before lunch. "I got your message about the paintings," he said. His manner was reticent, not like him at all.

"It was worth following up," she assured him. "I would have got around to doing it anyway."

"That feeling I had that something was out of kilter. I know what it is now. It's that small oil painting, the funny one with the flying saucer or whatever. I'm sure of it."

"What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know, but something is."

"I know it stands out from the others. But it turns out Tyler knew the artist: they went out partying together when McCarthy visited England a few years back. And believe it or not, it's the most expensive piece there."

"Ah." Greg began to look a lot more contented. "It's wrong, Amanda."

"How? It's still there, it wasn't stolen."

"You asked me in on this, remember?" he said gently. "I didn't think I'd have to convince you of all people about my gland all over again."

She stared at him for a minute while instinct, common sense, and fear of failure went thrashing about together in her head. In the end she decided he was worth the gamble; she had asked him in because she wanted that unique angle he could provide. Once, she'd heard Eleanor, his wife, call his talent a foresight equal to everyone else's hindsight.

"How do you want to handle it?" she asked in a martyred tone.

He grinned his thanks. "Somebody who knows what they're about needs to take a look at that painting. We should concentrate on the artist, too...get Alison to mine some background on him."

"Okay." She called Mike Wilson over.

"An art expert?" he asked cynically.

"Crescent must have a ton of them," Greg said. "Art fraud is pretty common. Insurance companies face it every day."

"We have them, yes, but..."

"An expert has told us something is wrong with the painting, and this is my investigation," she said, not too belligerently, but firmly enough to show him she wasn't going to compromise on this.

He held his hands up. "All right. But you only get three lives, not nine."

Hugh Snell wasn't exactly the scholarly old man with fraying tweed jacket and half-moon glasses that Amanda was expecting. When he turned up at Church Vista Apartments he was wearing a leather Harley Davidson jacket, a diamond stud through his nose, and five rings in his left ear. His elbow-length Mohican plume was dyed bright violet.

He took one look at Tyler's collection and laughed out loud. "Shit. He spent money on these? What a prat."

"Aren't they any good?" Amanda asked.

"My talent detector needle is simply quivering...on zero. One hates to speak ill of the dead, my dear, but if all he wanted was erotica, he should have torn the center pages out of a porno mag and framed them instead. This simply reeks of lower middle-class pretension. I know about him, I know nothing of the artists—they say nothing, they do nothing."

Mike Wilson indicated the McCarthy. "What about this one?"

Hugh Snell made a show of pulling a gold-rimmed monocle from his pocket. He held it daintily to his eye and examined the painting. "Yeah, good forgery."

Amanda smiled greedily. "Thanks, Greg."

"No problem."

"It's insured for twenty thousand," Wilson said.

"Alas my dear chap, you've been royally shafted."

"Are you sure?"

Hugh Snell gave him a pitying look. "Please don't flaunt your ignorance in public view, it's frightfully impolite. This isn't even a quality copy. Any halfway decent texture printer can churn out twenty of these per minute for you. Admittedly, it will fool the less well versed, but anyone in the trade would see it immediately."

"Makes sense," Amanda said. "The smallest and most valuable item, you could roll it up and carry it out in your pocket."

"Certainly could," Greg murmured.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Mandel," Mike Wilson said.

"Not a problem," Greg assured him.

"Congratulations," Wilson said to Amanda. "So it was a burglary

which went wrong, then. Which means it was a professional who broke in. That explains why we've been banging our heads against the wall."

"A pre-planned burglary, too, if he'd brought a forgery with him," she said. "I bet Tyler would never have noticed it had gone."

"Which means it was someone who knew Tyler had the McCarthy on his wall, and how much it was worth."

Amanda went up to the McCarthy; and gave it a happy smile. "I'll get forensics back to take a closer look at it," she said.

## Three — Degrees of Guilt

Greg managed three hours of sleep before Christine decided it was time to begin another bright new day. His eyes blinked open as her cries began. Nothing in focus, mouth tasted foul, limbs too heavy to move. Classic symptoms—if only it were a hangover, that would mean he'd enjoyed some of last night.

"I'll get her," Eleanor grumbled.

The duvet was tugged across him as she clambered out of bed and went over to the cot. "Isn't it my turn?" he asked as the timber of the crying changed.

"Oh, who cares?" Eleanor snapped back. "I just want her to shut up."

He did the brave thing, and kept quiet. In his army days he'd gone without sleep for days at a time during some of the covert missions deep into enemy territory. Oh, to be back in those halcyon times. Christine could teach the Jihad Legion a thing or two about tenacity.

Eleanor started to change their daughter's nappy.

The doorbell rang. Greg knew he'd misheard that. When he squinted, the digital clock just made it into focus: 6:23. The bell went again. He and Eleanor stared at each other.

"Who the hell...?"

Whoever they were, they started knocking.

The hall tiles were cold against his feet as he hopped over them to the front door. He managed to pull his dressing gown shut just before he flicked the lock over and pulled the door open. A young man with broad bull shoulders had his arm raised to knock again.

"What the bloody hell do you want?" Greg yelled. "Do you know what time it is?" Christine was wailing plaintively behind him.

The young man's defiance melted away into mild confusion. "Eleanor lives here doesn't she?"

"Yes." Greg noticed what the man was wearing, a pair of dark dungarees with a cross stitched on the front, blue wool shirt, sturdy black leather boots. It was his turn for a recoil; he hadn't seen a kibbutznik since the night he faced down Eleanor's father. "Who are you?" He ordered a tiny secretion from his gland, imagining a tiny mushroom squirt of white liquid scudding around his brain, neurohormones soaking into synaptic clefts. Actually, the physiological function was nothing like that; picturing it at all was a psychological quirk that most Mind-star Brigade veterans employed. There's no natural internal part of the human body which can be consciously activated; only muscles, and you can see that happen. So the mind copes by giving itself a picture of animation to explain the

onrush of ethereal sensation. The result left him sensing an agitated haze of thoughts, entwined by grief. The man had forced himself to the Mandel farm against all kinds of deep-rooted doubts.

"I'm Andy," he said it as though puzzled that Greg didn't already know...as though his name explained away everything. "Andy Broady. Eleanor's brother."

Andy sat in a chair at the kitchen table, uncomfortable despite the cushion. He'd glanced around with a type of jealous surprise at the oak cupboards and tiled work surfaces. Greg followed his gaze with a mild embarrassment. The fittings were only a few years old, and Mrs. Owen came in to clean and help with Christine three times a week; but the room was still a mess. Baby bottles, washed and unwashed were all over the worktops, two linen baskets overflowing with clothes, packets of rusks, jars of puréed apple and other mushy, disgusting-tasting food were stacked in shop bags ready to be put away. Last night's plates and dishes were waiting on top of the dishwasher. Big, rainbow-colored fabric toys underfoot. Half the broad ash table was littered with the financial printouts which Eleanor had generated as she worked through summaries of the citrus grove crop and market sales.

Christine gurgled quietly in Andy's lap, and he looked down at his new niece with guilty surprise. His lips twitched with a tentative smile. He held her with the stiff terror of every bachelor, frightened that he'd drop her, or she'd start crying, or burp, or choke or...

"How old is she?"

"Coming up six months." Eleanor opened the dishwasher and retrieved three cups.

"She's lovely."

"Make me an offer, you can take her home with you today."

Andy's head came up in shock. Greg gave him a reassuring wink. Eleanor filled the cups from the Twinings carton and put them in the microwave. Greg never used to like instant tea, quietly fancying himself as a reasonable cook. These days everything was in convenience units.

Eleanor sat opposite her brother, and gave him a sympathetic look. "All right, what's happened, Andy?"

"Happened?"

"You wouldn't have come here otherwise."

He nodded reluctantly. "It's dad. There was an accident."

"Oh, shit." Eleanor let out a sigh, rubbing at her eyes. "How bad?"

"He was hit by a car. We took him back home, but he can't move. He hurts a lot, and he's hot...like with fever. Coughs blood. Other end,

too.”

“And of course he won't go to hospital.”

Andy shook his head, too glum to speak.

She put her hand on his arm, squeezing reassuringly. “Who's looking after him?”

“Paddy, but he's not as good as you were at medicine and such. Don't have real training. Dad didn't want any of us to go to college for courses, not after you left. Said that all outside the kibbutz was an evil place, that it corrupts us.” He gave Greg a nervous glance. “Said that the devil stole you away.”

“I wasn't stolen, Andy; I was driven away. I saw what life can be like if you just have the courage to live it.” Her hand moved to Greg. “And have a little help.”

He kissed the top of her head. Andy's expression hardened.

“I'm not arguing with you Andy,” she said. “But we're all free to make choices. Even you, because I know he didn't ask you to come up here today.”

“So? Will you come and see him?”

“Yes, Andy, I'll come.”

It was a funny kind of day to find the perfect definition of mixed feelings, Greg thought, but now here he was torn between complete disapproval and devotion. Didn't want Eleanor to go anywhere near the kibbutz, let alone back inside, and couldn't leave her to do it alone.

It didn't take long to drive to Eggleton. The kibbutz was on the other side of the tiny village, on a flat expanse of land that bordered the road. One side of it was Rutland Water, a shoreline which ironically put only a short stretch of water between them and the Mandel farm's citrus groves on the peninsula. Close in miles, but not in time.

Eleanor had described the kibbutz to him often enough, there were even a few places on the farm where he could just make out their roofs over the top of the coconut palms they'd planted along their section of shore. Even so it came as a surprise. The buildings were all single-story, clumped together in three concentric rings with the church in the center. Long huts that were half house, half barn or stable. Unlike anything else built since the Warming, they didn't have glossy black solar-panel roofs, just flat wooden slates. Brick chimney stacks fumed wisps of gray wood smoke into the clear sky. Beyond the outermost ring, a pair of donkeys were harnessed to a wooden pole, circling a brick well-shaft, turning some incredibly primitive pump.

The fields surrounding the buildings were planted with corn, barley, maize and potatoes; dense clumps of kitchen vegetables in

each one made them resemble oversized allotments. Some had fruit trees, small and wizened, with zigzag branches and dark-green glossy leaves. Greg drove the Ranger down a rough dirt track that indicated a boundary. They stopped at a gate in the maze of tall sturdy wooden fences which surrounded the buildings; paddocks and corrals containing goats, donkeys, cows, some elderly horses, llamas. Neither the crops nor the livestock were genetically modified varieties, Greg noticed.

He busied himself unstrapping a sleeping Christine from her baby seat while Eleanor looked around her old home with pursed lips. She grunted abruptly, and pulled the first-aid case from the Ranger's boot, slamming it down. They made quite a spectacle walking to the Broady home through the dried mud which filled the space between the buildings, while dogs barked and giant black turkeys waddled away squawking loudly. Several children ran alongside, giggling and calling to Andy. They seemed well fed, Greg thought, though their clothes were all homemade and patched. The adults still milling among the buildings eyed them suspiciously. Several must have recognized Eleanor; because they nudged each other and traded meaningful looks.

Eleanor didn't even hesitate when she reached the front door. Shoved it open and walked in. Greg and Andy followed. It was a single long room, brick oven with iron doors at one end, bed at the other, with a few simple pieces of furniture between. The walls were hung with pictures of Jesus and Mary. Windows had shutters rather than glass.

A pale figure lay on the bed, covered by a single thin blanket. Greg probably wouldn't have recognized Noel Broady. He'd only seen the old man once before, years ago, the night he met Eleanor. If any two people in the world were destined never to be friends, it was him and Noel.

Now though, that stubborn face was sunken and sweating. Grey hair had thinned out, several days' stubble furred his cheeks and chin, flecked with dry saliva.

His eyes flickered open and he turned his head at the commotion. A dismissive grunt. "I told that boy not to go bother you."

"Andy's not a boy anymore, father, he's a man who makes his own decisions. If he wants to tell me about you, he can do."

"Stubborn. Stubborn." He coughed, his shoulders quaking, and dropped his head back on the thin pillow. "Have you not yet learned God's humility, girl?"

"I respect God in my own way, father."

"By leaving us. By turning your back on Jesus and your family." His finger rose to point at Greg. "By lying with that abomination. You

live in sin, you will drown in sin.”

“Greg is my husband now, father. You were invited to the wedding.”

“I would not despoil all I have taught my flock by giving you my blessing.”

“Really?” Eleanor put the first-aid case on the floor, and opened it. She took out the diagnostic patch, and applied it to the side of her father's neck. He frowned his disapproval, but didn't resist.

“You have a granddaughter,” she said in a milder tone. She began running a handheld deep-scan sensor along his arms, switching to his ribcage. A picture of his skeleton built up in the cube of her Event Horizon laptop terminal.

Noel's weak gaze moved to the bundle riding in Greg's papoose; for a moment surprise and a lonely smile lifted the exhaustion from his face.

“She's called Christine,” Greg said, moving closer so he could see. Christine stirred, yawning, her little arms wiggling about.

“She looks handsome, a good strong child. I will pray for her.” Talking was a big effort for him, the words wheezing out. He coughed again, dabbing a pink-stained handkerchief to his lips.

Eleanor took a breath, consulting the terminal cube again. Greg didn't need his gland to see how worried she was.

“Dad, you have to go to hospital.”

“No.”

“You've got broken bones, and there's a lot of internal damage, bleeding. You have to go.”

“If God calls me, then I will go to Him. All things are written, all lives decreed.”

“God gave us the knowledge to save ourselves...that's why we've got doctors and medicine. They're his gifts—are you going to throw them back in his face?”

“How well I remember these arguments. Always questioning and testing, you were. There are even some nights when I miss them.” Noel gave her a thin smile. “How quickly you forget your scriptures. It was the serpent who gave us knowledge.”

“Dad, please. It's really bad. I can't fix this sort of damage. You have to go to hospital. And quickly.”

“I will not. Do not ask me again.”

“Andy?” Eleanor appealed.

“Your brother's faith is strong, unlike yours. He respects all we have achieved, all we have built. Ours is a simple life, my dearest Eleanor. We live, and we believe. That is all. It is sufficient for any man. Everything else—this fast, plastic, electronic existence you have chosen—is the road to your own destruction. You can learn no values



from it. It teaches you no respect for His glory.”

“I value your life.”

“As do I. And I have lived it true to myself. Would you take that dignity from me, even now? Would you punish me with your chemicals and mutilate me with your surgeon's laser scalpels?”

She turned to Greg, miserable and helpless. He put his arm around her, holding her tight. Noel was badly wrong about his own son, Greg sensed. Andy was desperate to intervene. There was a layer of fear and uncertainty running through his mind that was struggling to rise and express itself, held in check only by ingrained obedience. When he let his perception expand, Greg could feel a similar anxiety suffusing the entire kibbutz. It wasn't just shock and worry that their leader was harmed; some other affliction was gnawing at them.

“Well, I'm giving you some treatment anyway,” Eleanor said defiantly. She bent down to the first-aid case, and began selecting vials for the infuser. “You can't run away from me.”

Noel lay back, a degree of contentment showing. “The absence of pain is a strong temptation. I will succumb and pay my penance later.”

Christine woke up and began her usual gurgle of interest at the world all around. “I'll take her out,” Greg said. “Andy, could you give me a hand.”

Andy gave his father an uncertain glance. Noel nodded permission.

Outside, Greg turned so that Christine was shielded from the bright rising sun. The kibbutz had resumed its normal routine of activity, interest in the visitors discarded. He looked across the collection of worn buildings with a kind of annoyed bemusement. Ten years of his life had been spent in active rebellion against an oppressive government, a decade of pain and death and blood so that people could once again have a chance to gather some dignity and improve their lives. And here on his own doorstep this group strove to return to medievalism at its worst, burdened by everlasting manual labor and in thrall to evangelical priests who could never accept anyone else was even entitled to a different point of view. A community where progress is evil.

The irony made him smile—something he would never have done before meeting Eleanor. A freedom fighter (now, anyway—after all, they were the ones writing the history files) appalled by the use to which his gift of freedom had been put. People...they're such a pain in the arse.

“He's gonna die, isn't he?”

Greg bounced Christine about, enjoying her happy grin at the motion. “Yes, Andy, I think he is.” The young man knew it anyway,

just needed to be told by someone else. As if saying it would make it so, would make it his fault.

"I can't believe it. Not him. He's so strong...where it counts, you know."

"Yeah, I know it. I had to face him down once. Toughest fight in my life."

"That's my father." Andy was on the point of tears.

"What happened?" Greg scanned the kibbutz again. "There's no cars here, no traffic."

Andy's arm was raised, pointing away over the fields toward the road. "There. We found him over there. Helped carry him back myself."

"Can you show me, please?"

They tramped over the sun-baked mud tracks, moving along the side of the tall fences, a long winding route. Andy was quiet as they walked. Nervous, Greg assumed, after years of being warned of the demon who had captured his big sister.

"This is where we found him," Andy said eventually.

They were on a stretch of track running between two of the fences. Two hundred meters away toward Oakham was a gate which opened onto the tiny road linking Egleton with the A6003: a hundred meters in the other direction it led out into a paddock with other tracks and footpaths spreading off over the kibbutz land, a regular motorway intersection.

Greg knelt down beside the fence where Andy indicated. A herd of cattle on the other side watched them idly, chewing on the few blades of grass they could find amid the buttercups. The three lower bars of the fence were splintered, bowing inward; and they were thick timber. It had taken a lot of force to cause that much damage. They had some short paint streaks along them, dark blue; a dusting of chrome flakes lay on the mud. Greg stood and tried to work out the angle of the impact. The car or whatever would have had to veer very sharply to dint the fence in such a fashion. It wasn't as though it would be swerving to avoid oncoming traffic.

"Was he right up against the fence?" Greg asked.

"Yeah, almost underneath it when we found him."

"Did he say what happened?"

"Not much. Just that the car was big, and it had its headlights on full. Then it hit him, he got trapped between it and the fence."

"Headlights? Was it nighttime?"

"No. It was early evening, still light."

"Did anyone else see it happen?"

"No. We started searching when he didn't turn up for evening chapel. It was dark by then; didn't find him till after ten."

"What about the car?" Greg indicated the gate onto the road. "It must have come from that direction, where was it going?"

"Don't know. Didn't come to us; haven't had no visitors for a while. We're the only ones that use this bit of track. It's the quickest way out to the road."

"What do you use on the road?"

"We've got bicycles. And a cart; horse pulls it to market most days. We sell vegetables and eggs. People still like fresh food instead of that chemical convenience packet rubbish."

"Okay, so the car must have reversed away and got back onto the road afterward. So was your father on a bike?"

"No." Andy shook his head ruefully. "He didn't even like them. Said: God gave us feet, didn't he? He always walked into town."

"Do you know what he was doing in town that day?"

"Gone to see the solicitor."

"What the hell did Noel want with a solicitor?"

"It's a bad business been happening here. A man came a month or so back. Said he wanted to build a leisure complex on the shore, right where we are. He offered us money, said that it wasn't really our land anyway and he'd help us find somewhere else to live. What kind of a man is that to disrespect us so? We built this place. It's ours by any law that's just and true."

"Right," Greg said. Now probably wasn't the best time to lecture Andy on the kind of abuses which the local PSP Land Rights committees had perpetrated against private landowners. Nevertheless, expelling a farmer from his land so it could be handed over to a tribe of Bible-thumpers was a minor violation compared to some of the practices he'd heard of. The Party had been overthrown in one final night of mass civil disobedience and well-planned acts of destruction by underground groups, but the problems it had created hadn't gone with it. "So what did Noel want with a solicitor?"

"He kept coming back, that man, after we said we wouldn't go. Said he'd have us evicted like so many cattle. Said everyone around here would be glad to see us go, that we were Party, so we'd best make it easy for ourselves. Dad wasn't having none of that. We have rights, he said. He went and found a solicitor who'd help us. Seeing as how we'd been here so long, we're entitled to appeal to the court for a ruling of post-acquisition compensation. Means we'd have to pay the farmer whose land it was. But that way we wouldn't have to leave. It would cost us plenty. We'd have to work hard to raise that much money, but we ain't afraid of hard work."

"I see." Greg looked down at the broken sections of fence, understanding now what had really happened here. "What is this man's name, the one who wants you off?"

“Richard Townsend, he's a property developer lives in Oakham.”

“You think Townsend had my father run down?” Eleanor asked. They were sitting out on the farmhouse's newly laid patio, looking across the southern branch of Rutland Water. Citrus groves covered the peninsula's slope on both sides of the house's grounds, the young trees fluttering their silky verdant leaves in the breeze. Phalanxes of swans and signets glided past on the dark water, their serenity only occasionally broken by a speeding windsurfer.

“It's the obvious conclusion,” Greg said bitterly. “Noel was the center of opposition, the one they all follow. Without him they might just keep the legal challenge going but their heart won't be in it. For all his flaws, he was bloody charismatic.”

“You mean intimidating.”

“Call it what you like; he was the one they looked to. And now...”

She closed her eyes, shuddering. “He won't last another day, Greg. I don't think it would make any difference now, even if we could get him into hospital.”

She hadn't talked much about her father's condition since they had arrived back at the farmhouse at midday. The morning's events were taking time to assimilate. She had done what she could with the medicines in the first-aid kit, easing the worst of his pain. He had pretended indifference when she said she would return later. It didn't convince anyone. Her ambivalence was a long way from being resolved. It had been a very wide rift.

“Townsend won't have done it personally,” Greg said. “There'll be a perfect alibi with plenty of witnesses while whoever he hired drove the car. But he won't be able to hide guilt from me during the interview.”

“That won't work, darling,” she said sadly. “It still takes a lot for a jury to be convinced by a psychic's evidence. And you're hardly impartial in this case. A novice barrister on her first case would have you thrown out of court.”

“Okay. I accept that. We need some solid evidence to convict him.”

“Where are you going to get that from? You don't even really know for certain that it was Townsend. You can hardly interrogate him privately and then tell the police what he's done and ask them to follow it up.”

“The car is evidence,” Greg said. “Andy called in an official hit-and-run report from Eggleton's phonebox. I'll start with that.”

Greg left Eleanor at the kibbutz next morning, and drove on into Oakham. It had been a couple of years since he'd visited the police

station. The desk sergeant reacted with a stoicism verging on contempt when Greg asked him what progress had been made on the hit-and-run. "I'll check the file for you, but don't expect too much."

"The man it hit is my father-in-law. He's going to die from the injuries."

A squirt of information colored the sergeant's desktop terminal cube with flecks of light. "Sorry, sir. Whoever reported the incident didn't know what the vehicle was, nor when it happened. If we don't have anything to go on, we can't make enquiries. There's nothing to ask."

"Did anyone even go out there and check? He's dying! The driver of that vehicle has killed him."

The sergeant did manage to look reasonably embarrassed. "The nature of the injuries wasn't disclosed at the time, sir. It's not down here."

"Would it have made a difference?"

"The case would have been graded accordingly."

"Graded? What the fuck is graded?"

"We would have given the incident a higher priority, sir."

Greg bit back on his immediate reply. Shouting at the ranks wasn't going to solve anything—it was the generals not the squaddies who decide the campaign strategy. He paused, took a breath. "What about forensic? There are all sorts of marks out there, even some paint off the bodywork. Any decent forensic lab would be able to match the paint type with the manufacturer, at least get an idea of what kind of vehicle they were driving. Then you could start asking if anyone saw it."

"Yes, sir. Was the gentleman insured?"

"For what?"

"Crime investigation finance. It's becoming more necessary these days. Most companies offer it as part of their employment package along with health cover, pension, housing guarantee, that kind of thing. You see, the sort of investigation you're talking about launching will absorb a lot of our resources. The Rutland force has only limited civic funds. To be honest with you, successfully tracing the driver would be a long shot. The chief has to focus his budget on areas which have a good probability of bringing positive results."

"I don't believe this. He's a kibbutznik, he's not employed by some big-shot corporation. The only money they have comes from selling eggs at the market. But that doesn't mean he's not a citizen; he's entitled to time and attention from the police."

"Sorry, sir. I'm not trying to discourage you, just telling you the way it is these days. I don't want you to leave here with false hopes of us being able to launch a manhunt for the driver. And even if we did,

a hit-and-run incident without a witness..." He shook his head. "Just about zero conviction rate."

"I can pay," Greg said. He pulled out his platinum Event Horizon card. "Just show me what I have to sign, and get that bloody forensic team out there."

"It's Sunday, sir. The assigned case officer won't be in until tomorrow, I'm afraid. You'll have to speak with him about upgrading the investigation status."

Greg wondered if they would have the resources to investigate a member of the public punching an officer inside the station. Tempting to find out.

"There are private forensic laboratories, sir," the desk sergeant said. "We have an approved list if you'd like to use one. Some of them are very good."

It was no good shouting. Greg could see he was trying to be helpful, after a fashion. At which point Amanda Patterson called out his name.

Greg put the two pints of Ruddles County down on the table. Mike Wilson gave his glass a wary look.

"Cheers," Greg said. After they had got back from the Sullivan bungalow, he had waited outside the police station until the insurance agent had come out, then invited him for a quiet drink at the Wheat sheaf pub just around the corner. So far, Wilson was curious enough not to offer resistance, but he was clearly worried.

"You can relax," Greg told him. "I used to be a private eye. I've worked on corporate cases before. I understand the need for discretion at times like this."

"Uh huh." Mike took a sip of his beer.

"I know who did it." From a psychic perspective, the jolt of surprise flashing into Wilson's mind was quite amusing. He only just managed to avoid it triggering a physical jerk. That spoke of good self-control. Greg wasn't surprised at that, it confirmed several things he had speculated about the man.

"Who? We didn't see anyone who matched that bloody genome image."

Greg folded his arms and smiled. "You don't need to know."

"Why the hell not?"

"I don't want them convicted."

"I see."

"Which is the same reason you were given this investigation, isn't it? Keep an eye on Amanda. Wise move by your company. I worked with her before. She's a smart girl. And a very good police officer. She won't make compromises."

"And you will?"

"When it suits me. And this certainly does."

"Crescent Insurance would be happy to consider an adequate remuneration for the time you've spent advising Oakham CID."

"You should research more. I'm already rich."

"What then?"

"Tell me what line of investigation Crescent wants avoiding, and I'll see if we can help each other."

Wilson took a slow sip, and eased back into his chair. "Okay. I'm actually on secondment to Crescent; my employer is Hothouse."

"Byrne Tyler's agency?"

"Yeah. Look, showbiz is not pretty, okay? We deal with images, illusions. That's what we sell: characters larger than life. To the general public, Byrne is some hot young chunk of meat with a six-pack stomach and the devil's smile. In the dramas all he's got to do is show off that body in some tough action sequences and blow away bad guys with his big gun. In real life we portray him as an It Guy; he goes to all the best parties, he dates the most beautiful actresses and models, he's friends with the older, real celebrities. That's what we're promoting here, the more he's in the 'casts, the more 'castworthy he is. Doesn't matter if it's private-life gossip, or reviews for his latest pile of interactive shit. We put him out there and shine a light on him for everyone to idolize and buy every tie-in funny-colored chocolate bar we can slam at them. We make money, and Byrne gets a bigger apartment and a better nose job. Unfortunately, in reality, he's some half-wit sink-estate boy from Walthamstow we uprooted and dropped in front of the cameras. That's a shock to anyone's system. Certainly for him it was. He couldn't tell where the image stopped and life began. He's got a syntho habit, a dream punch habit, a sweet&sour habit...he even uses crack, for Christ's sake; he can barely remember his one-word catch-phrase, and his autograph isn't in joined-up writing. What I'm saying is, he needs—needed—a lot of agency management and handling to cope with his new existence, right down to potty-training level."

"You didn't like him."

"I've never met him. Like I said, this is showbusiness, with the emphasis on business. Byrne Tyler was an investment on Hothouse's part. And it was starting to go ripe. A year ago he was living on credit, and his career was nose-diving. Well, even that's okay. It's not exactly the first time that's happened to a celeb. We know how to handle that. We got him partway through detox therapy, paired him up with the gorgeous Tamzin, and together they're riding high. Bingo, we're back on track, he's being offered new interactives, she's getting runway assignments for the bigger couture houses."

"So you wrote a happy ending. So what's the problem?"

"The problem is the middle of the story. When his cash was low and no studio would touch him, he earned his living the oldest way you can. All those trophy wives who's husbands are so decrepit they can't even take Laynon anymore. Single trust-fund babes, except at their age they aren't babes any longer. Even supermodels who wanted a serious no-comebacks, no-involvement shagging one night. Tyler serviced them all."

"Let me guess. You pimped him."

"Our investment was going negative. We pointed people in the right direction. Nobody got hurt. It paid off."

"Except now he's dead. And he recorded all those women on that big waterbed of his."

"Stupid little prick." Wilson nodded remorsefully. "Was it one of them, some husband or boyfriend who found out?"

"No. You're in the clear."

"Hardly. Amanda Patterson is going to start phoning around that goddamn list he left behind. Look, he beds twenty rich and famous girls, and he's a superstud, a hero to the lads. Thirty and he's unbelievable...how the hell did he manage that? Fifty of the richest women in Europe night after night, and damn right nobody'll believe it can happen. There's going to be rumors; the media will start scratching round. We won't be able to keep a lid on it."

"Perfect," Greg said. "I can deliver someone who can take the rap for Tyler's death. Amanda will stop phoning your list, and go after him instead. The Tyler case will be closed, and the women involved can quietly apply to the police for the recordings to be wiped under the privacy act."

"Who is it?"

"A nasty little man called Richard Townsend."

"Never heard of him."

"No reason you should. But I'm going to need a motive to link him in with Tyler. What other failings did our late celebrity have?"

Gabriel Thompson was one of Greg's oldest friends, from his army days. Morgan Walshaw he knew pretty well, handling security for the biggest company there was: Event Horizon. Trustworthy and competent at exactly the level Greg needed. It helped that the two of them had taken a shine to each other after meeting on one of Greg's cases. They'd moved in together a few months later, living in a grand old terrace house in Stamford.

Greg phoned them as soon as he got back from his drink with Mike Wilson. They arrived together at the farmhouse as the sun was sinking behind Berry but spinney on the far shore. Gabriel helped with



Christine's bath time, while Greg and Morgan tackled the menu from the Chinese take-away in Mill Street.

They wound up sitting in the conservatory with the cartons from the take-away on the big cedar table. Pink light drained away from the clouds bridging the horizon leaving a quiescent gloaming in its wake.

"I need a safeguard before I agree to this," Morgan said after Greg had finished talking. "I appreciate there's a lot of circumstantial evidence that Townsend had Noel Broady run down, but we don't know for certain."

"I'll get myself in on the preliminary interview," Greg said. "If I can see he's guilty of paying someone to run Noel over, will that be enough for you?"

"Yes," Morgan said. "I'll accept your word."

"If he's not?" Gabriel asked archly.

"Then we collapse the deal. It'll leave a nasty smell, but at least he walks away."

"Okay," she said. "So what's the link between him and Tyler?"

"Hothouse set up a virtual company for Tyler to sell his action dramas and interactives. I think there's even a best-of compilation from Marina Days."

"Compelling stuff," Gabriel muttered.

"Yeah, anyway. This company is called Firedrake, and Mike Wilson has agreed to sell Hothouse's half share. It's only a pound New Sterling, so they don't exactly lose out. All we have to do is convince Townsend to buy it, and back-date the agreement."

"Why?" Morgan asked.

"Tyler wasn't quite as stupid as you'd think. He was using the site to sell bootleg memox crystals of his own stuff. Any orders you place on the Firedrake site are supposed to go to the distribution company that's contracted to deal with all Hothouse's clients. Tyler, the clever little sod, rigged the site so that two thirds of the orders are redirected to a bootlegging operation that he's got an arrangement with. That way, instead of getting his half-percent royalty payment from the cover price of the genuine crystal, he gets fifty percent of the price from the bootleg. Cash only, non-taxable. Hothouse found out about it a month ago, and confronted Tyler. He claimed he knew nothing, and that some hotrod had hacked into the site and loaded the diversion instructions. As his engagement to Tamzin was starting to produce results, Hothouse overlooked it, and sorted the site out."

"So whoever his partner in Firedrake is, they're being ripped off by Tyler," Eleanor said. "Anyone examining the Firedrake site order log and comparing it to the legitimate distribution company's orders will see the missing sixty percent straight away. The partner in

Firedrake will have a justifiable grudge against Tyler.”

“What that partner will do is have Tyler's apartment broken into, and steal a painting that is of equal worth to the missing money. Unfortunately, Tyler was at home when the burglary happened, there was a brief struggle, and he got pushed downstairs. That makes whoever received the stolen painting an accessory to murder. It'll be the physical proof Amanda needs to nail him.”

“Can you get us a painting out of the apartment?” Gabriel asked.

“I think so,” Greg said. “I reviewed the Macmillan art encyclopedia database. We got lucky, the most valuable piece Tyler owns is also the smallest one. It should be easy enough to lift it.”

“When do you want to start?” Morgan asked.

“Right away. See if you can get an appointment with Townsend tomorrow morning. Gabriel, you're going to be the accountant. You'll have to hire an office for us in Peterborough. It needs to be ready by Tuesday at the latest. Suzi will give you a hand.”

“Suzi? You're kidding!”

“No way. I'm going to bring her in as your company's secretary. She'll be perfect as the courier for the swap—Townsend won't argue with her.”

“Jesus wept. Okay, if you say so.”

“What about the Firedrake site?” Morgan asked. “Won't Townsend be suspicious of me marketing the interactives of a dead celebrity?”

“You won't be selling Tyler's products,” Greg said. “I've got Royan designing a completely new architecture for us; from midnight, Firedrake will be selling software products and obscure music acts. Once Townsend has bought in, we'll change it back.”

Gabriel gave her glass of beer a quizzical glance, then smiled softly. “Sounds good to me.”

Greg had been right about Amanda Patterson—she was a first-rate detective. As soon as Hugh Snell confirmed the McCarthy was a fake she redirected her team's effort to produce maximum results. Every art house and auctioneer in the country was squirted an immediate notification about the painting, and CID staff were told to get in touch with known fences and dealers. A reward was mentioned.

Of course, as Townsend was blissfully unaware he had anything to hide, Sotheby's in Stamford got back to Amanda less than two hours later. Richard Townsend was identified.

“Not the person who actually pushed Tyler,” she said regretfully, as she compared his picture with the genome visualization. An undercover team was assigned to keep Townsend under surveillance.

Greg watched as she turned her team to establishing the link

between Tyler and Townsend. It was the accountant who tracked down the partnership in Firedrake. After that it was plain sailing. The accountant worked well with Alison, running analysis programs through the virtual company's records. The distribution company made their order logs available.

By ten o'clock that evening they had it all worked out. Byrne Tyler was ripping off his Firedrake partner Townsend, who discovered what was happening. Knowing the money would never be paid over, a burglar was hired for a custom theft. But there had been a flaw. Byrne Tyler was awake when the break-in occurred. There must have been a struggle.

Amanda took the case to Vernon at quarter past ten. He reviewed it, and authorized the arrest warrant.

Throughout the interview with Townsend, Greg had felt as if he was the one on trial. Not so far from the truth. He was the one who had brought them all together. The strain was twisting him up inside, having to wait patiently while Amanda asked questions which Townsend didn't understand, let alone have answers for. Finally, he could ask the one question that counted.

Physically, Townsend froze up. His hands gripped the armrests, sweat glistened on his brow as his mouth hung open. In his mind, horror and fright rose like ghouls to contaminate every thought.

"Guilty," Greg said. He hoped he hadn't sagged at the release of his own tension.

"Thank you, Mr. Mandel," Amanda said.

It was the tone which alarmed Greg. He hadn't been paying attention to the detective. Now he could sense the doubts rippling through her mind. She held his gaze steadily, and said: "I think we both need to take a break now. No doubt you'd like to consult with your solicitor, Mr. Townsend. Interview suspended." She switched the AV deck off. "Greg, a word, please."

"Sure."

As they left the interview room a frantic Townsend was whispering furiously to Jodie Dobson. Amanda went straight downstairs and out into the station's car park. She rounded on Greg. "What the hell is going on?"

"You were right about him, my question confirmed that."

"Oh, bollocks, Greg. He doesn't have a clue what's going on."

"He's guilty. I swear it, Amanda."

"Yeah?" She dug in her pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

"I thought they were illegal?"

"No. That's a common mistake. Usage just prohibits you from claiming National Health Service treatment. If you choose to make yourself ill, don't expect the state to pay to make you better. So given

that smoking actually makes it illegal to go to an NHS hospital, it's easy to see how confused people can get over the actual wording of the law. And it suits the government to encourage that confusion."

"Are we talking in metaphors here?"

"I don't know, Greg. I don't know what's metaphor, what's confusion, and what's truth. But I'm bloody sure Townsend didn't have anything to do with Tyler's death. Detective's instinct, remember."

"The evidence points straight at him."

"Yes. With amazing clarity. Funny how that all fell together yesterday. Why yesterday? Why didn't we have it before?"

"We only discovered the painting had been taken yesterday."

"So we did. No, actually, you did. On the third visit. What's the matter, Greg—psychic power not what it used to be?"

"It's not an exact science."

"No, it isn't. But you're right. We're lucky to discover the painting. After all, it must have been stolen during a burglary, and that burglary must have been last Wednesday night. Because it couldn't have been taken afterward; no one else has been alone in Tyler's apartment since then, have they Greg? Alone downstairs while I was taking a stupid call from Mike bloody Wilson."

Greg spread his arms, trying not to show how alarmed he was getting. "A few seconds."

"How long does it take to switch something that small?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Neither does Richard Townsend. He claims he only received that painting yesterday."

"He claims. Do you think Alan O'Hagen can confirm that?"

"You know as well as I do I'll never get to ask that question. But my investigation only took off once every piece of the puzzle was dumped into Townsend's hands for me to find." She dropped the half-smoked cigarette and crunched it under her foot. "What the hell happened to you, Greg? You, I thought you, of all people were trustworthy. For Christ's sake, you fought the PSP for a decade while people like me hid behind our desks. This is the world you were fighting for. Are you surprised it's not perfection? Is that it? Do you have so little faith in the police, in me, that you have to fabricate all this crap to set up an innocent man? Who the hell are you protecting, Greg?"

"Amanda, I promise you, Townsend is not innocent. He is responsible for someone's death."

"But not Tyler. If I asked that in the interview room and he said no, what would you tell me, Greg? Would you tell me he's lying?"

"You have all the evidence you need. It will hold together in court without my testimony. He's an accessory to murder. He's responsible."

"And you couldn't prove it? Not for the real crime. That's it, isn't it? No proof. So you set him up for this."

Greg remained silent, wondering where all this shame he was suddenly feeling was coming from.

"Fine, Greg," she said. "You got your man. But what about Tyler's killer. He's still walking around loose. He got away with it, with murder. Tyler might not have been the best person in the world, but surely he deserves better than us turning our backs on him?"

"Tyler wasn't murdered. It was a genuine accident. Although, if he hadn't been the person he was, it wouldn't have happened."

"What do you mean?"

Greg slowly took his cybofax from his jacket pocket, and flipped it open. The face of Tyler's killer looked out blankly from the screen. Greg typed in a few simple instructions, altering the characteristics age-projection program. The face evolved again, but not running its standard eighteen-to-eighty cycle. This time it went back eight years. Daniel Sullivan stared out at Amanda.

"Oh, fuck," she whispered.

"He found out that Tyler was blackmailing his sister into having sex," Greg said. "So that night he sneaked into the Ingalo's boot. He must have got in through the cloakroom window, probably even saw them on the bed together. Tyler heard him moving around and went to investigate. Daniel pushed him. A little boy incensed at what he'd seen happen to the sister he loved."

"And she covered for him," Amanda said. "Turned down the air-conditioning, took the crystal from the AV deck, wiped his fingerprints, then drove him home."

"Yeah."

"You knew it all the minute you walked into the bungalow, didn't you?"

"That poor kid was so scared I'm just surprised no one else noticed him."

"I need another cigarette."

"You shouldn't. They'll kill you." He waited to see what she'd do.

She took the packet of twenty from her pocket, and after a long moment handed them to him. "You keep them, and don't tell the health police, huh?"

"I don't have time right now. I have to organize a funeral."

"Anyone I know?"

"My father-in-law. He died after a hit-and-run."

Amanda paused for a moment. "Take care, Greg."

"And you." He got into the Ranger, and drove out of the station car park. A last glance in the rearview mirror showed him Amanda squaring her shoulders, then marching back into the station.

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